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SWEET DESTINY

A Romantic Novel

Romance

It all started on Felicia's twenty-first birthday—a memorable occasion in any girl's life. But that birthday was to be positively historic in Felicia Saunders's life, for it was on that day she first glimpsed young Roger Munro. The meeting was perhaps unromantic, as Roger, clad in oily dungarees, was busily engaged in repairing an Army lorry by the roadside. But even so it was really a case of love at first sight. Only Felicia was a rich man's daughter, and Sir Miles Saunders was a big business man, sufficiently ruthless to break anything that stood in his way, even including his daughter's heart. Miss Christine Strathern's charmingly told romance will entrance many readers.

By the Same Author

THE BUCHANANS MOVE IN
CLOUDS OF GLORY

CHRISTINE STRATHERN

Sweet Destiny

A ROMANCE

COLLINS

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1944

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CHAPTER ONE

No ONE would certainly have guessed there was a war on from the breakfast spread on the beautiful round polished table. Nor for that matter would they have guessed so much was prepared for only two. Nevertheless, only two people were sitting at table this morning in the spacious room, so handsome it could be described more as an apartment than a room. And the two people were Sir Miles Saunders and his young daughter, separated from one another by the sea of table, in whose polished depths reflections vied with the realities that threw them.

He was occupied with his mail and the newspapers, which he opened to see what "the market" was doing, throwing them on the ground once he had seen, with the disregard of a man who is accustomed to being waited upon. In his middle fifties, he was not an unhandsome man still, although his figure betrayed that it was now rather too accustomed to such breakfasts. But he was so tall he could afford to become even more portly without appearing either too stout or gross. He knew when to draw the line even there!

So engrossed was he in his mail, his breakfast, and "Brazilians," that he was serenely unaware of his daughter's growing impatience on the other side of the table. She was so pretty that prettiness did not aptly describe her. The word lovely was more applicable. Everything about her was so fine, the texture of her skin, the silkiness of her hair, which was of that fairness that is in no way related to the butter family but which hairdressers describe as "ash blonde." Her eyes were blue—blue as a child's when it first comes into the world. They were shadowed now with annoyance she could no longer keep to herself.

"I do think, daddy," she protested, "you might pay me some attention since it is my twenty-first birthday."

The paper he was studying, like a screen between them, did not move an inch.

"You think I've forgotten?" he demanded coldly.

"No, of course I know you haven't, daddy." Her eyes were deepened now with tears. "Only," her voice gave a little, "keeping my birthday to-morrow isn't the same as

to-day when it is to-day, if you know what I mean." A little weebegone, she gazed at the black print of the newspaper hiding her father from her. "I'm sorry, daddy," she whispered. "Forgive me, it's just—twenty-one's different from all other birthdays, that's all."

He never looked of course, he never would look, she knew, at the In Memoriam notices on the front page of the newspaper. But when she picked it up after he had gone, she knew she would read under the name Saunders: "In remembrance of my beloved wife who died on the 5th April, 1921."

That was why her father never "celebrated" her birthday with her on the day, because her mother had died bringing her into the world. Instead it was the custom in Newstones, the "big" residence in the neighbourhood of Raldon, where the Saunders lived, to "keep" Miss Felicia's birthday the day after.

He suddenly threw the newspaper he was reading behind him and gave all his attention to finishing his breakfast.

"I won't need you to-day, darling," he announced. He took time to smile to her. "So you can have a holiday!"

"Oh, won't you, daddy?" she said, disappointed. "Are you quite sure?" she asked doubtfully, for she did so like to be needed.

"Quite sure," he assured her, rising and finishing his tea standing. "Fenwick'll drive me."

He walked towards the door, moving with that swiftness and lightness that is characteristic of some large men, and paused at her chair to kiss her good-bye. He stood there, musing down at her, thinking she was a very little thing to hold everything in the world for him! As though touched at the thought, he stooped suddenly to kiss her again and hold her for a second to him.

Twenty-one, he thought, and lovely as a flower. Men looked at her when he took her about. He could scarcely expect to be her only escort all through her life! There were several, he knew, only too willing to take his place. Lord Trevere's son Jules for one. He would be the best match for her, the father cogitated: family, tradition, breeding on the one side, beauty, brains, wealth on the other. In his capacious capable mind he drew a ring round Jules Trevere for his only daughter.

Felicia moved over to the windows once she was alone

and looked out. But her eyes were clouded to be gazing at so beautiful a prospect, with the trees in the grounds ringed round with crocuses and daffodils making bright the sward. Another holiday! That meant another day in which to do nothing. Oh dear, would nothing ever happen to her, even on her twenty-first birthday?

"Now, Miss Felicia," Mrs. Stimson, the housekeeper, reproved her when she complained to her about nothing ever happening and everything that did happening all wrong, "what difference does it make holding your birthday to-morrow instead of to-day? You know it has nothing to do with to-day being your twenty-first! As far back as you were old enough to complain, you've complained about not holding your birthday on what you call the right day."

"Oh, I'm sure I haven't," protested poor Felicia. "Mother was lovely wasn't she, Stimmy?" she sidetracked her with the expertness born of long experience in dealing with the none too loquacious housekeeper.

"She certainly was," conceded Mrs. Stimson in her non-committal way that only gave the dead their due. "You're like her and yet you're not like her. She had such beautiful hair—red I'd have called it, but the Master said it was Titian. Poor dear," her voice sighed as she sorted out her memories, "a red-haired woman always has a difficult time in childbirth. What a day that was. The master had to be kept back from attacking the doctors, because he thought they had sacrificed the mother for the child——"

"And it was months—wasn't it, Stimmy," prompted Felicia, like a child wanting to hear it 'all over again,' "before he could bring himself even to look at me?"

"Well, and if it was," said Mrs. Stimson in her disappointing way, "he's made up for it since. If ever a child was the apple of her father's eye, it's you, and well you know it! He'll be spoiling you to his heart's content to-morrow. Not what he will give you with him, but what he will not give you!"

But it's not the same whatever anyone says, Felicia said mutinously as she went out of doors for want of something to do inside. To-day was her birthday, not to-morrow. She was twenty-one to-day, and new feeling. To-morrow she would be quite used to it. Nothing that happened to-morrow would make up for to-day, when things should be happening, all over the place, but weren't, if you know what she meant.

It would have been simple for her to have reached the road by passing between the imposing iron-wrought gates, but Felicia was nothing if not feminine. She always chose the difficult way out, climbed a dyke when she could have opened a gate. Now she slipped over the wall that stoutly divided Saunders property from the public high-road, with that slight feeling of guilt that even now being "on her own" gave her. For she had been so protected as a child, never allowed to go beyond the iron-wrought gates unless accompanied, that now, when she did find herself by herself, it was always with a definite sense of surprise.

On the road she was confronted by a stationary vehicle and a pair of man's boots. She saw only the soles of them, great tackety military soles. And from below the stationary vehicle she heard a series of explosions, apparently emitted by the vocal end of the man's boots, which began to drag themselves out from beneath the lorry. Khaki socks that could have been more tightly adjusted, and a pair of knees then made their appearance at what seemed a great distance from the boots. Fascinated, Felicia watched what was unwinding itself in oily dungarees from beneath the lorry.

"Hullo," he greeted her, when he saw her staring. And he began to stare back at her. He had a long lean handsome young face, she noticed that, and a lock of brown hair fell untidily across his hot forehead. She noticed that too.

"Hullo," she said politely in return. "I was wondering when on earth you were coming to an end!"

He laughed down at her, his grey eyes teasing as he wiped his black hands on a blacker piece of waste."

"All good things have to come to an end!" he said.

"Are you stuck?" she asked, a little disconcerted by the frankness of his gaze. "Perhaps I could help you—I drive my father's car, you see."

"That your war work?" he demanded, beginning to poke about in the lorry's "inards" under the hood.

"Yes," she said, and her eyes clouded again. Of course her father had pulled strings, of which his capable hands were full, to get her, in the conscripted class, to drive his car. She didn't think she would have objected to that so much if only he would let her do a full day's job driving him to his business in Glasgow, the works, or the Clyde docks, but all the advantage he took of his daughter's services made her feel as though she were only playing at work.

"Like it?" he asked in a matey way.

"Oh, yes," she replied without enthusiasm, "I suppose I do. Do you like your work?"

"You bet I do." He threw a spanner into the air and caught it, to show how much he liked it. "I've always been crazy about machinery, ever since I got into the clock at home when I was five to find out where the cuckoo lived! That's why I've joined the Engineers. You never hear about them, do you, but let me tell you the army may march on its stomach, but there wouldn't be an army to have a stomach if there weren't us R.E.s. We're the maids of all works of the services, that's what we are. Chuck me the oil can, will you?"

Well, after all, she had offered to help him. He took the oil can from her as a matter of course, and then pointed out to her with the point of his penknife exactly what had gone wrong, unconsciously flattering her by using the technical names for the different pieces of machinery, names that were Greek so far as she was concerned. She said, "Yes," and "I see," and "Of course," when she saw nothing of the kind, but he was too much of a male and interested in what he was saying not to be taken in by such feminine disguise.

"Well, that's that," he said, slamming down the hood. "I've got time for a cig." He fished about in a baggy pocket and proffered her a broken packet. "Have one?" he invited.

Her hesitation was so momentary he never noticed it, and lit her cigarette for her after scratching the match on the sole of his boot. She sat down on the stump of a tree and he stretched his long length on the grass at the wayside.

"Live near here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, but didn't tell him that was her father's wall he was leaning against. "Do you?" she interrogated.

"Only as the crow flies," he replied, "and if you call fifty odd miles to Glasgow near. Still it was a lucky break my being trained near here, for I can look in and see them at home every now and then. How old are you?"

This was like a game of consequences! This young man, who didn't know who she was, was treating her quite differently from all the other young men she met, who decidedly did know who she was. He was treating her like the girl next door, or the girl he met one Saturday afternoon at tennis. The technique, apparently, was to tell each other everything

about oneself—just to be going on with—in exchange for hearing everything about the other.

"To-day's my birthday!" she dimpled at him.

"No! I say—you don't say it is!" To her utter surprise the next moment she was given a hug of congratulation. "Many happy birthdays, and all the best," he was saying.

She was taken aback but he wasn't in the least, which helped her to regain her composure. He had hugged her, she realised, exactly as he would have hugged one of his own sisters. She felt sure he had sisters.

"I guess this is your eighteenth birthday," he said.

"No, don't be silly, of course it isn't," she replied, ruffled. "I was eighteen years ago. I'm twenty-one to-day. But no one keeps my birthday at home to-day. To-morrow. You see, my mother died when I was born and my father can't forget."

"Still, that's tough luck on you," he said.

"You think it makes a difference?" she asked eagerly. Think of meeting someone on the king's highway like this who saw her point!

"I should say I do. All the bloom, the shine'll be off your birthday by to-morrow. Delayed action—that's what I call it! How many are there in your family?"

"I'm afraid there's just me," she said, apologetically.

He smiled up at her, his eyes lazy behind his lids.

"I might have known that," he said, "from the look of you. They used up all the dearness when they made you instead of spreading it over a bunch."

Strangely disconcerted, she looked rather wildly away. Of course she had been paid compliments all her life, but not like this. He meant what he was saying, this young soldier stretched at her feet in his oily dungarees. She could smell them where she sat.

"How many are there in your family?" she asked, her heart beginning to beat rather fast.

"Five," he told her, "and I'm the eldest." He wagged his head at her in a I'm the King of the Castle way.

"Five!" she said ecstatically. "Oh, how lovely. What fun you must all have. An eldest, and a youngest, and a middle one—all that kind of thing." Enviously she looked at him.

"Never thought of it like that," he said, laughing good-humouredly at her enthusiasm. "I know there always seems

an awful crowd of us when we're all together ! Mother always says we sound more like fifty than five ! ”

“ You—you have a mother ? ” Felicia asked diffidently. This man seemed to have everything that rightfully belonged to a family !

“ Yes. She's a darling. She writes books. Oh, I don't think she thinks it so wonderful. She had to do something, you see, when dad died ten years ago. Other families live from hand to mouth, but she says we live from page to page ! She says her idea of heaven is a place where there's no pen or paper ! ” He sat upright, his brown eyes intent, his companion quite forgotten. “ I'm going to see,” he vowed, “ she has a bit of heaven on this earth as soon as I jolly well can ! ” His cigarette at an end, he asked, “ Have you the time ? ”

“ Yes,” she said, starting and looking at her beautiful little watch. “ It's a quarter to eleven exactly,” she told him carefully.

“ Right. I'll need to be off.” He stood up and dusted the grass from himself, then gave her his hand to help her to her feet. “ What's your name ? ”

“ Felicia,” she said, her heart beating in the silliest spasmodic way—because of course this was good-bye.

“ Is it ? Mine's Roger. Yes, I like Felicia. It means something, doesn't it ? ”

“ Happiness,” she managed to say, a little breathless because he suddenly seemed so near her, this tall strong young man. “ The minister called me that on the spur of the moment, for daddy couldn't think of a name. He didn't want me called after mother, you see,” she related with the earnestness of a child, “ because that would have reminded him too much.”

“ Your old man sounds to me as though he knew how to hold a grudge all right,” he remarked.

She repudiated that of course most indignantly. To her there had always been something heart-brokenly romantic and sacred about her father's grief over her mother's death, something she felt she in some obscure way shared in.

“ All right, all right,” he assured her easily, “ have it your own way. Say, what about you and me meeting to-night ? I get two hours. Do you know The Rose Bush ? Oh, you must know The Rose Bush—it's in John Street, beside the cattle market. Well, I'll meet you there at seven. Is that a date then ? All right. Cheery-bye until to-night.”

She shouldn't have said she would go—she knew she shouldn't. But after all it was her birthday. Just for once—only because it was her birthday. Nothing wrong surely in sitting at a table with a man and hearing all about his brothers and sisters, their ages, and where they "came" in the family. Of course it was just a pick-up. That was all it was. And here was she going out with one. She didn't even know his second name. And he didn't know hers. Did that make it all better or worse? But when he did, she had the funniest feeling it wouldn't make any difference to him. Put him neither up nor down. Her father would still be to him "Your old man."

"Well, Fenwick," easily Sir Miles settled himself back in the cushioned seat of his car beside his secretary, "any news about the property?"

"Yes, sir, I've found out to whom it belongs," answered Fenwick. He was so correct he always sounded quite wrong to his master! "It's to a woman."

"Good," replied Sir Miles with satisfaction, studying some typed documents on his knees. "Drive me to the property first."

"Yes, sir."

"Well," grunted his master, "is that all you've found out? She's just a woman!"

"Oh no, sir. I've found out her circumstances and everything. Her name is Munro—Mrs. Munro—and she's a widow. Lives in a Glasgow suburb."

"Circumstances easy?"

"No, sir, anything but. A large family and no husband. She writes books to keep the pot boiling. Sometimes they're on the 'phone and sometimes they're not—all depends on whether last quarter's account has been paid. That kind of family." Fenwick's voice betrayed what he personally thought of that kind of family. "The property cannot bring her in more than fifty pounds a year in rents, and most of that will probably be consumed by repairs and lawyer's accounts. The authorities thought of buying it as far back as '32 for a post office. I believe the price tentatively offered to Mrs. Munro was two thousand pounds. But the plan fell through as the post office was built in John Street, next the cattle market, you will remember. The authorities apparently thought Mill Street was in a back-water."

"The authorities thought right for once!" remarked Sir Miles, ejecting himself out of the comfortable car, after it had drawn up, on to the squalid pavement of a back street in Raldon.

Mill Street—it always depressed him, with its uneven outline of ugly tenements broken by one-storied cottages or two-storied houses, relics of a day when the town herd drove his cattle up the brae of Mill Street to the green fields beyond. Buildings rose now where lush green fields had spread. No longer a country lane, Sir Miles would have described it as a slum. And he had the contempt for Mill Street he had for all things that had not moved with the times and were therefore a failure.

His expert eye ranged over the piece of waste ground at which his secretary had drawn up the car. Sharon Lane was apparently its name for those interested in "This promising site" were enjoined by a storm-rent notice-board to call for details at—— Rain and mischievous boys had blotted or scratched out the name of the firm.

The piece of waste ground was long and narrow, with some derelict houses more like huts squatting upon it in a temporary way. Two angry-looking hens, their necks thin and extended, attacked the hard ground. An old woman, with a shawl over her head, came out of the most dilapidated of the houses and emptied a pail of dish water into the yard.

Well pleased with what he saw, Sir Miles withdrew into his car.

"Drive me to Mrs. Munro's," he ordered his secretary.

"This it?" he enquired some appreciable time later, looking up from the papers in his hands as the car drew up in a quiet suburban road where every house stood in a small green front garden.

"Yes, sir. The one called Ornum."

"Ornum? What a name to give a house! What does it mean anyway?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir. Most of them have very high-sounding names, I notice. The one next it's Braemar."

"And the one on the other side Windsor Castle?" joked his master. "I don't know how long I'll be, but you'd better turn the car now."

Ornum certainly needed more than a lick of paint. The garden gate swung drunkenly on a broken hinge as he pushed it open. He had thought of offering two thousand to +

owner of Sharan Lane property, which he knew he could re-sell at twenty thousand, but from the look of things he believed she would be pleased with less. Say eighteen hundred. Eighteen hundred would be treasure trove to the owner of Ornum.

He stood waiting to be admitted, gazing up at the name in gold lettering written on the door's fanlight. Of course—Fenwick wouldn't see a thing like that! But Ornum was Munro written backwards! Good heavens! and he, Saunders, had thought the name belonged to an old-time saint or something equally ridiculous.

A maid, well below the conscripted age, answered his peal at the bell, took his visiting-card as though she didn't know what to do with it, gave him a hunted look, and then placed him firmly in what was obviously the drawing-room of the house. Its blues and pinks faded into mauves, it bore the rather sad charm of more resplendent days. He heard the maid go upstairs for her mistress as he thought, I'll offer her sixteen hundred—she'll be glad to get it from the look of things.

The door was pushed open and a small boy entered. Sir Miles, who believed the secret of success was never sparing yourself in detail, took some trouble to be genial with him. The little boy, apparently overcome with shyness, stood with his back to the wall and eyed him with a brown eye. Sir Miles thought they were getting along famously until the lady of the house entered, when the child spoke for the first time. With unmistakable clarity he declared,

"I don't like that man!"

"Tim, darling!" protested his mother. Darling, thought Sir Miles grimly, little traitor! She wavered an apologetic smile at their visitor, who pretended, as he came forward to greet her with gusto, to have heard nothing. "Tim, darling, run away to Jennie," she whispered to her offspring, who evidently liked Jennie, for he went at once.

"My dear Mrs. Munro," Sir Miles greeted her as though she were an old friend, "you must forgive me for taking up your valuable time. I know how occupied anyone so brilliant as you must be, particularly in these trying times."

"I am happy to meet you," she replied, socially at her ease, he noticed. "Won't you sit down?"

She was pretty yet—in her youth she must have been remarkably pretty—with that about her that few of the

younger generation to-day would ever acquire, presence.

She looked young to have a grown-up son, but Sir Miles guessed correctly that the photograph in the place of honour on the mantelpiece was her son, a man in private's uniform, with his forage cap set on at a cock-sure angle.

"I can hardly believe that's your son!" he said, at his most charming.

"You're flattering me!" she smiled back. "But sometimes," she confided, "I find it difficult to believe myself! To have a son at exactly the same age that his father was when I met him."

"You must be wondering what has brought me here," he remarked, watching her closely while he seemed to be doing nothing of the kind. "As a matter of fact, I was out seeing your Sharon Lane property in Raldon this morning and would, of course, have gone to your lawyers, not to trouble you with business, only their name is no longer on the notice-board."

She leant forward eagerly, her face lit. One thousand pounds he would offer her and not a penny more! He had her—in a cleft stick! The cleft stick they said that caught you in the end. But he would see he was never caught!

"You're interested in it? Indeed. My lawyer is Marshall, Maitland & Co., Dale's Chambers."

"Ah yes. I know them. Good firm. Excellent firm. Well, shall I get in touch with them, Mrs. Munro, to make my offer?"

Her eyes widened with pleasure at his word "offer."

"No, make it to me," she replied as he knew she would. "They are an excellent firm as you say, but I always find them so slow. So hard to get moving, if you know what I mean."

"Exactly," he agreed, "all these old-established firms are, I always think."

"You're really interested in the Sharon Lane property?" she asked, wanting to bring the conversation back to what concerned her more than a discussion of her lawyers.

"Yes, I am," he replied musingly, her eagerness not lost upon him. "But of course it's a bad shape, Mrs. Munro."

"Being long and narrow with so small a frontage?" she conceded. "But it all depends what it is wanted for, Sir Miles. Now, I always thought it would have been excellent for a cinema."

"So it would," he praised her, "the very thing. Then its drawbacks could all have been utilised. But of course people don't build cinemas in a neighbourhood that is not going down but has quite definitely gone down."

"I know," she sighed, "that's what Mr. Marshall was always telling me. I find lawyers very depressing. That was when the post office nearly bought it. They were going to pay me two thousand for it."

"You wouldn't get two thousand for it now, I'm afraid," he said, shaking his head cogitatively. "That surely must have been at least ten years ago? Yes, I thought so. '32 did you say? Ah. Times have changed since then and the neighbourhood certainly hasn't improved in those ten years. With things as they are, I'm afraid you wouldn't get more than eight hundred now. You may feel you want to hold on to it, and I would be advised by Messrs. Marshall, Maitland & Co., there, but of course with every year that's passing the property's becoming worth less and less. You'll practically get nothing from the rents, do you?"

"Absolutely nothing. In fact last year I was out of pocket. I must say it would be a relief if— Only, Sir Miles, if you do buy it for eight hundred, I want to make something quite clear."

Of course there would be a condition since she was a woman. Very much a woman from the look of her. His head bowed attentively to hear her slightest wish, he waited for the worst.

"My old nurse, Nancy Ritchie, lives there—in one of the houses. Poor old dear, I'm afraid it will be a great blow to her being moved after all these years." Helplessly, she looked at him. "She keeps hens too, which she shouldn't do, I know. But she'll need to be found somewhere else, and the other tenants too."

"Of course." That was all! He wanted to let out his breath with relief. "The Rent Restrictions Act," drat it! "sees to all that, Mrs. Munro, but we'll find the old lady somewhere much better than Sharon Lane."

He bowed reassuringly to her, taking that responsibility on to his magnificent masculine shoulders while he thought, No wonder you've never made ends meet—encumbering yourself with an old nurse. That dirty old woman probably who emptied the pail of dish water. The poorhouse is the place for her. She'll have been living rent free all these

years, I'll be bound. And from the look of you, you'll be fool enough to pay her rent now when she does get moved.

"How good of you, Sir Miles, if you would see to that for me."

Eight hundred, she was thinking desperately. It wouldn't be eight of course by the time the income tax was done with it. Still, anything was better than nothing—pennies from heaven when you were used to nothing, as she was! She could ease off writing just a little, or perhaps wiser to put it in the bank and try to keep it for something to draw on if the worst ever happened. Which of course it wouldn't. The worst never happened. To prove that, think of this man coming out of the blue and offering her eight hundred for Sharon Lane property which she had begun to despair of ever selling. Just when things were so tight she had felt caught in the cleft of a stick.

"Well, I'll get it all put through for you," promised Sir Miles, rising.

That was quick work even for him, he congratulated himself once back in his car. He knew he could not "put it through" quick enough for her. That suited him all right.

He would see that the whole matter was disposed of as soon as possible. Eight hundred he was paying, he thought with satisfaction, for property he was able to re-sell at twenty thousand.

Of course she couldn't go and meet a man whose second name she didn't know. What did he take her for, what did she take herself for? "That kind of thing" simply wasn't done in Felicia's circle, a circle that circumscribed everything that was proper, correct, in its right place at the right time.

Time! Of course she couldn't go. Think of the time. He, that man, Roger—her thoughts faltered—had asked her to meet him at seven. She had been crazy to say Yes, when she knew perfectly well she dined with her father at seven. If she weren't there to have dinner with him, naturally her father would want to know where she was, and with whom. Any day he would want to know that, but particularly on to-day of all days. And she couldn't possibly tell him for she didn't even know Roger's second name.

Think of thinking of herself to such a degree that she arranged to meet a man on the very day that her father

always re-lived the agony of his wife's death. She had forgotten everything, every single thing, except the word Yes, when a long lanky man asked her to meet him at a teashop she had never heard of before.

Of course she wouldn't, couldn't possibly go. That man, Roger, must know she wouldn't turn up, that she wasn't "that kind of girl," the kind of girl men picked up, on public high-roads. But it made it no better for her to know that Roger would never dream of her not turning up, that he didn't think of her as "that kind of girl," but as the kind of girl who wouldn't let a fellow down.

Again she felt the delirious shocked surprise that she had experienced when he hugged her by way of congratulation. What would he feel when he sat on at The Rose Bush and she didn't "show up?" What would she feel thinking of that nice-looking face turned towards the entrance, watching the people coming in, at first eager, then puzzled, incredulous.

She just mustn't think about that. That was weak, of course, and she knew it, but it was the only way out. She couldn't meet him, she must think of her father, remember what anniversary to-day was, of course she couldn't meet him—ever. And remembering her father, she must forget all about the man she had met quite by chance this morning, drop him entirely out of her mind. Funny how despoiled, how utterly bereft, she felt doing that even for a moment or two, as though she were stripping herself not only of the warmth of friendship but severing herself from a complete family with all their clinging loving ties.

"That was Sir Miles on the 'phone, Miss Felicia," Mrs. Stimson entered the room to tell her. "He won't be home for dinner to-night and won't be back until late."

Blankly Felicia gazed at the place where the housekeeper had stood, as though she were still there, her hand at her cheek. Her father wasn't coming home for dinner—to-night of all nights. As far back as she could remember, this was the first anniversary of her mother's death that he had ever spent away from home. Her heart began to lilt for him. She dreaded so his shutting himself away in his own room after dinner and seeing no one, enduring by himself what no one on earth could soften or alleviate. It would help him to be away from home, amongst people who had no connection with his sorrow.

Below her hand she felt creep slowly across her cheek a

flush. Roger! Of course she could go to The Rose Bush now, the biggest, indeed the only impediment had been removed. It almost looked as though she were meant to go, as though fate were arranging, making everything easy for her. She could go now, but of course she wouldn't. However could she think of such a thing? The whole affair savoured of a "pick-up" and that was something that had never happened to her before, must never happen.

It was time she began to dress for dinner, but she didn't go upstairs. Instead she sat where she was, telling herself she had never thought of keeping the appointment and if she had—well, she just didn't know what could have come over her. She went upstairs at last, but instead of going to her wardrobe, she sat on her bed while her thoughts came and went, like people going in and out of a doorway. Her gaze pinned itself on her beautiful little clock, one of daddy's presents to her. A quarter to seven. She just had time to change for dinner.

She went to her wardrobe and opened it, but her hands didn't bring out one of the dozen odd frocks. Instead she found herself buttoning herself into a coat, pulling on a jaunty little hat with a feather, finding her handbag, a pair of gloves. One last look in the mirror—that was really her looking back at her, Felicia Saunders, flushed, wide-eyes, vibrant as a violin-string; one palpitating glance at the clock—ten minutes to seven.

"I'll have to hurry," she said to herself, and ran breathlessly from the room as though she had wings.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE RAN out of the house. It was April and early dark. The familiar avenue looked unfamiliar in the darkening light, enchanted, mysterious, beckoning. Felicia, trying hard to keep her feet on the ground, ran back into the house.

"Annie," she said breathlessly to the young housemaid, "I won't be in for dinner. I have to go out." She spoke emphatically to prove to herself how necessary it was for her to go out. "I won't need anything when I return—unless a little supper." She looked at the polite face of the trim maid, wondering if Annie had ever gone out with a man who picked her up, a man whose second name she didn't know. "Good-bye, Annie," she said suddenly, and flew.

Well, thought Annie, I never did. Where was Miss Felicia going to at this hour of the night, and on her feet too, not in one of her father's long smooth limousines? Looking for all the world as though she would fly off wherever the little feather in her hat chose to lead her? Never had Annie seen Miss Felicia look like that before. Miss Felicia who could change her clothes three times a day and yet not need to wear the same things for a fortnight at least, Miss Felicia who had gloves, shoes, handbags to match every outfit, who met lords and peers' sons and Sir Somebodies and Annie didn't know who all. Yet, the funny thing was, and Annie looked down at her cuffs carefully sewn on to hide where her dress was worn, she had never dreamed of envying Miss Felicia anything she had until to-night—when she found herself envying the jaunty little feather in her young mistress's hat.

Down the avenue sped Felicia, wondering if it were her feet or her heart she was hearing at runaway speed, at break-neck speed. Not that it mattered, not that anything mattered on this intoxicating night, when her feet had wings and her heart sprang like a bird. Through the great iron-wrought gates. Detached and semi-detached villas in the suburbs of Raldon, tenement areas in the centre of the city, had all yielded up their railings to the war effort. Yet the magnificent, elaborate, iron-wrought gates barring Sir Miles Saunders' estate from the highway still stood, as they had stood in

peace time, separating private property from public. On to the king's high-road, where she stood uncertainly, until a bus bumped round the corner, a bus heading for Raldon, a bus that must have left its base hours and hours and hours ago with the express purpose of bearing her to The Rose Bush. She clambered on to it, finding the step high and inaccessible. It was the first time, in her twenty-one years, she had ever been in a public vehicle.

She tendered half-a-crown and was surprised when she received two-and-three back in change. To think it only took a threepenny bit to take her to The Rose Bush! To travel in buses was surely a very cheap method of transport. The bus was full of miners and mill workers, and she had to stand, swinging on to a strap. None of them rose to offer her their seat, yet it was probably in her father's mills or her father's mines that they made their daily bread, but of course they weren't to know that. As she looked at these grimy strong faces, their big black hands lying on the cheap material of their coats and suits, she found herself wondering for the first time in her life, if it would make any difference even if they had known who she was. . . .

The conductress called out "The Cattle Market!" and she slipped on to the road, almost feeling as though she had escaped, although she wasn't quite sure from what or from whom. It was now quite dark and she had to grope her way across the road. For an incomprehensible second that stretched long as an hour she wondered if there was such a place as The Rose Bush and a man whose first name was Roger waiting for her inside it.

She reached it, saw inviting chinks that spoke of light and warmth whenever the door was opened, but for the life of her she couldn't go in. Supposing he wasn't—well, he would be, she knew that—but supposing—well, just supposing he didn't recognise her, had begun not to expect her. She was late: her heart tripped when she thought how late she was. Supposing he had got "fed up" waiting for her, written her off as a bad debt and left. Really, she expostulated to herself, she wasn't as late as all that! She found herself pushing open the screened door, and hearing a tiny fairy bell tinkle as she did so, warning those within of her approach.

She stood, a little dazed in the sudden dazzle of light and with all the excitement she had lived through, as though every Supposing and Let's Pretend might either come

miraculously true at that moment or shiver into the oblivion of hum-drum, where nothing ever happened.

Then she saw him, sitting on one chair at a small table for two with the other chair turned up, its back legs in the air, to keep for someone. And that Someone was Her. Supposing and Let's Pretend were coming, before her very eyes, as magically true as a fairy-tale.

He came forward to meet her, his brown face lit, eager. And all he could manage to say to her, both his hands fumbling to take one of hers, was "Hullo!"

"Hullo!" answered Felicia. The funny thing was, that was all she could manage to say to him, she who was used to meeting lords and peers' sons and "Sir Somebodies" and Annie didn't know who all.

They reached the small table for two, and he untitled the chair for her. It looked just as flyaway when it stood on its four legs as when it had kicked two in the air. He noticed that, but supposed it was because she, the girl he'd met this morning, was sitting on it, and she wore a feather in her hat and looked as though she were too good to be true. If he shut his eyes even for a second, he might open them to find she simply wasn't there, had never been there. . . . He stared at her across the table with unblinking concentration, as though that alone pinned her opposite him, while he heard himself say:

"Will you have coffee or tea? I think tea would be nice."

He was desperate for her to choose tea, to watch her pour it out for him, pause with her slim fingers on the milk jug while she asked him if he took milk and how he liked it. Coffee: everything would be done for them behind the scenes—there was no magic about coffee at all.

"Yes, tea," she agreed, bowing across the table to him.

He was as long and lanky sitting opposite to her as when she had watched him unwind his caterpillar form from under the army vehicle. But the lock of brown hair that had fallen untidily across his brow was brushed back now, his every button shone, his pockets had been emptied of all the junk he carried in them that his battledress might look neat, and she knew, under the table, his boots rivalled his buttons for polish, that his socks had not one wrinkle in them. . . .

Suddenly discomposed, she looked away. He thought all that much of her—the girl he had picked up on the high-road

that morning. She wasn't just a "pick-up," then, to him, as he wasn't to her. . . .

Her faltering gaze fell on the table and fixed itself on a small parcel without string placed carefully on her plate.

"For me?" she said wonderingly. "Oh, it can't be—you mean——"

Her face lit like a child's, she diffidently put out both her hands and lifted the parcel, undoing the twist of paper. Inside, pinned through a card, was a gilt brooch with the crest of the Royal Engineers.

"Oh!" gasped Felicia, "it's beautiful. My first birthday present. Oh, it's lovely!"

No need to explain to him that she felt this, her first birthday present, the only one she would receive on the "right" day, belonged to her in a way none of the others she would receive to-morrow would. As for him, he never dreamt of apologising because obviously it was only a cheap brooch. It was after all the best he could afford at so suddenly short a notice, he who, his mother's son, had, every penny of his next pay mapped out before he received it. The brooch would mean cutting his cigarettes to a minimum, but he had two saved for this evening, one to offer her and one to take himself not to make her feel awkward. That was all that mattered. And he looked at her across the little table with his nice eyes, warmed by her pleasure in his gift, watching the radiance light her small face as she unpinned it from its card.

"I'll put it in for you, if you like," he said shyly.

He leant over the small table and took it out of her hands. Their fingers touched and it was as though an electric current vibrated through both. With his strong well-made hands that had learnt never to use force where a thing could be coaxed or levered, he pinned the flimsy brooch into the lapel of her tweed coat, while she looked proudly down at it.

"You shouldn't have given me it," she said happily; "now I can't look at you for looking at it!"

She found herself shutting her eyes as though in prayer while she whispered, her heart big with gratitude, "Oh, thank you, God, for letting me come. Think—think—if I hadn't come——" And at such an appalling thought her heart seemed to miss a complete flight of stairs.

"Now, isn't this grand?" he said boyishly, pushing a plate of scones towards her. "You wouldn't know there was

a war on at The Rose Bush, would you? What do these rock cakes remind you of?" She didn't know, and had to be told. "Ailsa Craig, of course," he told her delightedly, and with his knife he pointed to a currant on one. "That's where you land from the Girvan boat. It's it exactly." He was so struck by the likeness he was overcome with laughter. "Have you ever been there in the nesting season? Or I suppose I should say the eggging season, for sea-gulls are appalling mothers; they don't take the trouble to build nests. Just leave their eggs on a cleft of rock or anywhere." What a lot he knew about everything, she thought, entranced. "In my dad's day, they used to fire a gun from the boat before they landed to scare the seagulls away. They can be quite dangerous when they have young, swooping terribly close to you to frighten you away. And in every dent of the rock, or little hollow, there's a palpitating bunch of feathers, still sticky with the egg it's come out of, opening their mouths so widely you'd really think they'd turn themselves inside out! Swallow themselves! When were you at Ailsa Craig?"

"I'm afraid," she said, nervous and apologetic, "I've never been to Ailsa Craig."

Astounded, he gazed at her across the small table.

"Oh, but you must have been," he said protestingly. "Are you quite sure? Not when you were at Girvan or Largs or Rothesay or Dunoon or any of those places?"

He saw from the face of the simply dressed girl sitting opposite him that she had never been at Girvan, or Largs, or Rothesay, or Dunoon, or any of these places, and cursed himself for his clumsiness in taking it for granted that, no matter how poor any one was, everyone went to the coast.

"No," she said, looking straight before her as though she were about to cry, "I—I have never been to any of these places."

No scramble for the only remaining bathing-box, no chattering-bites out of a baker's paper bag, no salt in her hair and sand in her shoes. Instead she had been every luxury cruise any super shipping line conceived: the Captain's table, deck tennis, swimming pools and dancing. The funny thing was always travelling not only first-class but de luxe, everywhere you travelled to was inclined to dissolve into the one state cabin. There was apparently no variety about the best.

"Well," he said, and he had never looked so nice as at that moment, "you've got all that to look forward to, haven't you? You'd love Largs," he continued. "I like it much the best. We always went there when we were small. It's got two burns, and you'll never guess what they're called? The Gogo and the Noddle! Really and truly. And there's a cottage all by itself on the hillside, and you'll never guess what it's called? Cock-ma-lane!"

She had sailed the Mediterranean, round the Cape, crossed the Atlantic, yet she had no picture in her mind of where she had been as clear-cut as this picture of Largs, where she had never been. She saw it: shore, sea and family picnics on the sands, with two burns rushing through the streets, and a tiny cottage perched precariously all by itself, eagle high.

"What's your name?" she asked suddenly, feeling the sooner they knew each other's second names the better, although what difference that made she really didn't know.

"Roger. Oh, you mean my second name? Munro. What's yours?"

"Saunders," she replied.

"Saunders?" he repeated, gulping down his beautifully hot tea. "No, I don't think that's a bit like you. Any one could be called Saunders, but only you could be called Felicia," and he decapitated his third scone.

If he had ever heard of Sir Miles Saunders, and Felicia was beginning to wonder for the first time in her life if there were some people who perhaps hadn't, then he certainly never dreamed the girl opposite was his daughter.

"I'd love to show you Largs," he was saying.

"I'd love you to show me Largs," she said in reply.

"The Broomfields and the house we always used to take for July, and the Pencil, and everything," he went on. "Prue once fell there, on the rocks, and 'put out' her knee, and never cried when the doctor put it in for her."

"Prue," she prompted him, bending towards him over the table in her eagerness, "where does she come in the family, Roger?"

"She comes after me, but there's eight years between us. You see, dad went over to Canada, a year or two after the last war, to try and get work. Everything was in an awful mess then. He meant to send for Mother and me whenever he got settled into a job, but he never got a permanent job.

Things were in an awful mess in Canada too; naturally they wanted any jobs that were going for their own men. He came back after five years, whenever he could scrape up his return fare. He came back steerage," Roger was staring at the rock cake that reminded him of Ailsa Craig. "He got work after a bit when he came home. Travelling for silk stockings. Funny, isn't it?" He took his gaze from the rock cake to look at her in a bemused kind of way and she felt mature and wise as though she were his mother at the appeal in that gaze, "I mean, when you think of it—dad, if he'd been alive, that is—wouldn't have been too old for this war." His voice jerked.

"I know what you mean, Roger," she said gently.

"He was all through the last," he said.

Her blue eyes were deepened as the queerest thought struck her. Perhaps her father had been in that boat that had brought Roger's father home: he had business connections both in the States and Canada. She had never thought of that before: never thought that the boats that bore them on pleasure cruises all over the world were also carrying men steerage, men who couldn't get work in either the Old World or the New, who had been "all through the last war."

"And after your father returned, Prue would be born," she encouraged him. "And who comes after Prue, Roger?"

"Denys. He's twelve. Eats enough for a regiment. And after him comes Jill. She's eleven. Then there's Tim. He is the youngest. He was born after Dad died."

"And which is your favourite?" she demanded, flushed and excited.

"Oh, Prue. But don't you let on that to her!" He wagged his head at her, and she thrilled at the intimacy of his words. "Prue and I did everything together. I'd her sitting on a donkey's back at Girvan before she was two!"

"Oh, Roger!" she expostulated.

"I know," he agreed. "but the only time she howled was when my pennies ran down and she was taken off! Now I've told you all about us. You tell me about you," and he stretched his two cigarettes towards her.

At his words the excitement dimmed from her face.

"There's nothing to tell about me," she said, the words drying on her lips.

Terrible to have lived for twenty-one years and then

suddenly find you had nothing to tell about yourself. What Felicia or her father did not realise was that the twenty-one years of her life had been twenty-one years of complete loneliness. Nurses and servants in her babyhood, governesses and tutors in her childhood, her father and his friends now. She had never had a companion, either boy or girl, of her own age until now, when she faced a young private across a small table in a cheap tea-shop.

She took a cigarette from the broken packet he stretched towards her, and as she did so she suddenly found her hand lying in his strong warm grasp. He was vowing to himself, "I'm going to make up to you for having such a lean time all your life." They looked deep into each other's eyes and that moment was for them both imperishable as eternity, while it held all the sweetness of the fleeting moment.

"I have to be back at camp at nine," he said regretfully, "but when can you meet me to-morrow? Same time, same place?"

Panic seized her, thinking of to-morrow, her "official" birthday.

"Not to-morrow," she said wildly, "I couldn't possibly come to-morrow."

"Next day, then?" he asked.

"Yes, but not at this time. It—it's difficult for me getting away in the evening."

Her state of nerves wasn't lost upon him. "Her old man," he thought grimly to himself, "fairly keeps her nose to the wheel."

"The morning's impossible for me," he said kindly, "but I could put in for my time off for the afternoon, if that would help."

"Yes," she said, over emphatic with relief, "that would suit beautifully. Friday afternoon then."

"Yes, here at four!"

"Here at four," she agreed, her heart beginning to pump with excitement at the thought of it.

"I'll put you in the bus," he said. "Which one do you get?" He stood, looking down at her, a smile upon his face. "Where do you live?" he asked. "Think of not knowing that! Why, I feel as though I knew everything about you—as though I've known you ever since you'd been so high!"

"Out of Raldon—a little," she said. "It's a fifteen bus I get, I think."

She thought how stupid he must think her, not to be sure what bus she should take, but he didn't notice her "I think." They moved towards the door and the little bell tinkled as he pushed it open. He looked down at her, and she looked up at him, to laugh to one another at the sweetness of it all.

They stood in the square and awaited her bus, feeling close to each other as they stood side by side in the darkness. They heard it jolting nearer them before they saw it.

"Good-bye," she whispered, "and thank you for the loveliest birthday I've ever had."

"Good-night," he said, "you're never, never, never, to say good-bye to me."

He didn't know how it happened, and she was as much at a loss as he, it happened so inevitably, as though it were not only the most natural thing but the only outcome when a girl and a man said good-bye before he saw her on to her bus. For he felt her in his arms and she felt the strength of his round her. In the sweetness of that first kiss he felt, in the windy dark, the softness of her cheek against his mouth, felt something not unlike tears of happiness upon her face. He remembered thinking it was like kissing a spring morning.

She clambered on to the bus, called "Good-night" through the blackness. It jolted and swerved and rumbled through the dark. The conductress called out "Newstones," and Felicia, feeling almost guilty, dismounted. That was the first time she realised her home was important enough to name a bus stop. Several people dismounted with her. She saw their faces, in the subdued light from the bus door, looking at her curiously, and realised they were members of the kitchen staff returning from their "night out."

She too felt as though she had had a night out, the first night out in twenty-one years, as she ran up the front avenue while they scuttled up the back.

Newstones had been built in that period of the last century when mansion houses were erected into edifices and the smallest villa was made pretentious with turrets and ornamental ramparts. It was that period when churches, massive with handsomeness, height and gloom, were built round their organs, which assumed a disproportionate importance to the building. Stained glass was to be found not only in

the smallest church or largest cathedral but in dwelling-houses. What was of questionable taste in a small villa was handsome in a rich ornamental way in a house the size of Newstones.

Felicia took it all very much for granted, the multi-coloured patterns the long hall window threw on the parquetry floor, the elaborate carving of the fine staircase, the brocade-hung drawing-room which Sir Miles kept perfectly preserved that it might remain exactly the same as when he last saw his wife's beautiful head against these pale yellow silk walls.

This morning, when she ran down for breakfast on what was her official birthday, she felt the very house was in league with Mrs. Stimson, whom she knew had kept back all parcels and presents arriving for her within the last few days until this morning. She could feel excitement run like a zipp fastener up the back stairs from the kitchens because it was "Miss Felicia's twenty-first birthday." That was why, when she entered the morning-room where she and her father breakfasted, her gaze at once fell on the flowers Cartwright, the gardener, had picked for her "out of his own garden," the birthday cake Cookie had made for her with its twenty-one candles and snowy with icing sugar.

Her father was there, having been busy picking up some of her parcels and studying the writing to discover which was from Jules. He was particularly anxious to know what Jules had sent her, and stood back now from the table with rather a guilty expression on his handsome urbane face.

"Well, my darling," he said, taking her in his arms, "this is the day you get the key of the front door, isn't it? As for the key of my heart, you've had it ever since you were old enough to twist me round your little finger."

"Darling daddy," she laughed back at him.

Like most dominant men, he liked to imagine someone could twist him round their little finger, but the very idea filled Felicia with amusement—darling daddy who would deny her nothing as long as she did exactly what he wanted, darling daddy who had such a strong personality she sometimes felt as though she had none of her own.

On a table was set out by Mrs. Stimson the birthday gifts for the daughter of the house. Felicia knew at once which ones to open first: her father's gifts were always so much bigger and handsomer than any one else's, and Mrs. Stimson had tactfully arranged all the others round them.

"Oh, daddy," she gasped when she opened the long jewel-case, "you shouldn't—I can't believe what I'm seeing. I don't feel I'm nearly important enough to wear a lovely, lovely thing like this!"

"Nonsense," he said bracingly, taking the necklace, a cascade of diamonds, from its case, and clasping it round her slim neck. "This is something for you always to remember your twenty-first birthday by—and me!" he put in.

"Oh, daddy," she cried out, suddenly kissing him, "I don't need diamonds to remember you by."

She looked so absurdly young holding back the neck of her fine woollen jumper that he could see his present to its very best advantage. But she was twenty-one. The thought made her father return to her presents. He began to say to her, "Now, who will this be from?" and "Do you know this writing?"

Oh, what fun she was having! Why, her father was more interested in her presents than if they had been his own! The happiness of sharing them with him.

"Haven't Aunt Mary and Uncle James been good?" she sighed happily.

"Um," he agreed. "Paying business this—having a twenty-first birthday? Now who'll this be from?" he demanded, an anxious look on his broad brow as he saw the unopened presents were now down to three. Supposing Jules—but he could have sworn that—

"Really, daddy," she protested blithely. "We must concentrate a little on each one we open! That's from Cousin Mary—I know by the way she makes her T's."

"Well, we'll open hers afterwards," he said ruthlessly putting Cousin Mary's aside. "Now what about this one?"

"I don't know," Felicia said thoughtfully, taking a small packet from him, "yet I feel I should know the writing, but it's such a tiny packet the writing's cramped—perhaps that's why I don't recognise it."

"Well, open it and see," prompted her father. This might be Jules, the packet was small, something probably in the best of taste.

Felicia, her arm through his, had some difficulty in taking the string and brown paper from the packet. Inside was a strong jeweller's cardboard box, and inside the box a jeweller's case. There was a visiting card, and she exclaimed, "Why, it's from Jules."

Her father heard the surprise in her voice : obviously she had forgotten all about Jules. . . .

She snapped open the little case and saw, winking up at them both, a small expensive brooch. Her hand suddenly stole above her heart, where a man last night had pinned his present on to the lapel of her coat. For Jules Trevere's present to her was an expensive brooch in the form of the jewelled badge of his crack regiment.

CHAPTER THREE

"WELL," said her father, expanding with pleasure as he looked down at the gift in his daughter's hand, "Jules certainly has done you proud, hasn't he?" And to himself he thought, I knew it!—"That's about the prettiest brooch I've ever seen. There's a letter from him, too."

"Yes," said Felicia, "there's a letter from him."

Her father, no longer interested in her presents, moved over to the breakfast table to give her a chance to read Jules' letter. Undoubtedly the young man was in love with her : his present confirmed that decisively. Things couldn't have worked out better. At this rate, before Felicia was twenty-two, she would be Lord Trevere's daughter-in-law.

Sir Miles felt warm with satisfaction as he sat down to breakfast at the very thought of that. And, war or no war, he'd see that she had a wedding and a half. It wasn't every day that his only daughter married a lord's son, right into the very heart of the aristocracy. Blood very near to blue would flow through Felicia's children. The grandchildren of Sir Miles Saunders would also be the grandchildren of Lord Trevere, one of the oldest families in Scotland or England.

"If it hadn't been for the war," he remarked as she seated herself opposite him, "you'd have had a twenty-first birthday party that would have kept the countryside in talk for a month of Sundays!"

"I know, daddy," she acquiesced nervously. But there was a war on, and she had been anxious to make it clear to him that she would only too happily forgo anything in the nature of a public festivity. Well she knew what giving a

party spelt to her father, no expense spared and everything of the lavish best, war or no war.

"But what's to hinder us having a few friends? I could 'phone up from the office to-day and order a table at the Malmaison. After all, you're only twenty-one once in your life, aren't you?"

"I'd rather just spend my birthday with you, daddy, really I would." Fondly she looked at him across the table. "You're the party I want," she said all the more sweetly because she meant it so earnestly.

"Just a few friends," he insisted, always an organiser. "I'll phone up Jules and ask if he can come along."

"Jules' leave has been postponed," she said, her voice sounding somehow small. "That's what he wrote to tell me, that he won't be home for a month at least."

No good giving a party when the guest you were giving it for wasn't able to be there! Sir Miles dropped the Malmaison idea the moment he heard—for the present anyway.

"Well, that's disappointing about Jules," he said, "but of course a soldier isn't his own master in war time. Even Lord Trevere's son has to take orders. But we'll give the party when he comes home on leave, eh? Yes, that's what we'll do—we'll postpone it until then. Why, last time he had leave, he spent more of it at Newstones than he did at home! We'll make a bit of a splash this time, won't we? He deserves it. A lovely brooch." He pulled the opened case towards him and appraised what it contained with an expert's eye that brightened, as it always did, when it fell on something really good. "You'll wear it at the party, of course. Black'd show it up well." He looked from the brooch to the fair beauty of his daughter with the glance of the born showman. "Yes, let yourself go over your party frock. Are you sure you're all right for coupons? You know to come to me if you're not. Madame will keep you right about black, but I think she'll approve all right. You know what the French always say, 'Black flatters the blonde'!" And as he gazed at Felicia, he thought: What it is to have a daughter who needs no flattering! She will look perfect when Jules comes on leave, as his bride, his wife: she will fit into the Trevere tradition to the manner born.

What her father did not understand was that the thirties are young to a man in his late fifties but quite elderly to someone just tipping the twenty scale. Jules was older not

by ten or twelve but fifteen years than Felicia, and there had never been anything very youthful about him even when he was Felicia's age. He was staid rather than grave, with an agreeable enough personality, which was not strong enough, however, to make him a man of events like her father. His turning to Felicia was, although he was unaware of it, the rather wistful groping towards a youth he had never had. Youth that he was fortunate to see embodied in the daughter of an important business magnate, who did not appear to discourage his attentions although he must be well aware that the Treveres might have breeding and tradition behind them but very little to keep either up. But Felicia herself was still quite unaware of this. To her, Jules was one of her father's many friends, a special one certainly, for her father let him come and go at Newstones as he wished, whereas with most of his friends he was particular not to invite them unless he himself was to be present.

"You're not to do any work on your birthday!" he joked now, "so I'll get Fenwick to drive me again to-day."

"Oh, but, daddy," she protested, "I love driving you. Let that be my birthday treat," she pled.

"You'll be busy enough writing letters of thanks for all those presents," he replied meaningly, "without driving me into dirty Glasgow. No, no, poppet, I won't hear of that on your birthday. You stay at home and get on with your letters," and she saw him smile to himself as though well pleased with his thoughts.

They would certainly take some time but she could easily fit them in. After all, the war wasn't stopping because it was her birthday! And driving her father was her war work. She wished he would take that as seriously as she did: she did so long to be indispensable to someone. It was disappointing to know that Fenwick, the perfect secretary, was also the perfect driver. Of course *any one* could really do the very little she was doing.

Once left alone in the breakfast-room, she looked round at her presents, her beautiful presents. If she had been a princess of royal blood she could scarcely have had handsomer ones! Yet the funny thing was she didn't feel nearly so much of a princess this morning as she had last night.

Her heart seemed to tiptoe at the very thought of last night, the blood rush to her cheeks as she felt again the pressure of Roger Munro's lips against her face when he

kissed her good-night. "You're never, never, never to say good-bye to me." Oh, how far away to-morrow seemed, until she met him at The Rose Bush at four. As she thought of the hours that stretched between now and then, she wondered how she was ever going to live through them.

Her heart seemed to race her feet as she sped upstairs to her bedroom and flew to her wardrobe. Before even removing her coat, she lay her face against its tweed. It has been through last night with her! Then she slipped it from its silk hanger and stood looking down at the badge in the lapel. She sat down on her bed to feed her gaze upon it and press its coldness against her cheek. "I'll put it in for you, if you like." She had felt, she still felt, as though he had decorated her. She put her hand over the badge as if to keep it safe in the hollow of her palm. She would never unpin his brooch from her coat, never, not until it was the only thing that kept her coat together! He had pinned it on for her, it would be unlucky to take it off. Naturally she was superstitious, treading softly fairly ground for the first time.

She sat at her mother's escritoire in the morning-room, writing her letters of thanks, in her coat for company's sake. She was methodical and careful in her own pretty way and had made a list, marking off a name after she wrote each letter. It was Jules' turn now. Her face furrowed a little unhappily. Why had she felt upset when she saw his gift sparkling up at her from its satin-lined nest? Her hand stole to the badge in her lapel, as though making up to it. Jules, her father's friend, could afford to give her the jewelled crest of his crack regiment of which he was a major, but it wasn't jewels that made a gift. It was dear of Jules, of course, it wasn't that she didn't appreciate his thought of her, but she knew last night, and had proved it to-day, that nothing would take the place of the present she had received on her "right" birthday. She looked down at her lapel and again she seemed to see those long, strong, well-scrubbed fingers pinning the badge of his regiment above her heart. No, it wasn't jewels that made a gift.

She was at The Rose Bush at four the next day. Her first glance told her that he was already there, at *their* table, waiting for her, keeping it for her. Her heart fluttered wildly. It was a tremulously shy, breathtaking experience to advance towards a man when the last memory she had of him was the feel of his lips against her face, the hold of his arms in the

gusty dark. He, too, seemed a little dazed, thinking of all the beauty of that first kiss. She could not raise her glance above the breast pocket on his battle-dress, and he noticed she still wore his brooch exactly where he had pinned it.

She looked such a very little thing to him. "Bonnie wee thing, lovely wee thing," his thoughts shouted, "if thou wert mine I would wear thee in my bosom lest thy beauty it should tine." That wasn't quite correct, but he was so heady with the sweetness of falling in love, he was stoutly convinced that this was the first time in history anyone had ever thought those words. Burns might have his Mary, Wordsworth his Lucy, Shakespeare his Dark Lady, but no one had ever been "in" for love so deeply as he. How could they be when no Mary or Lucy or Dark Lady could possibly come up to the girl he had met only the day before yesterday on the public high-road, outside a private estate? Just by chance people might think, but Roger wanted to laugh at the word chance applied to so wonderful a happening. Why, of course, it had been meant, that meeting, long before she was born, when he was "rising two." Those two years of life on this earth before she joined it must have been two rum years of emptiness, but of course he couldn't remember quite so far back. . . . All he knew was that every corner he had ever turned since, every street he had ever crossed, war itself with its crescendo of climaxes, had brought them nearer and nearer, until, the day before yesterday, when he wriggled from under the lorry on his back, they were close as touching—

He had so short a time with her now, it made him breathless thinking of all he wanted to say to her and all he wanted to hear. He hadn't known how he had been going to live through the endless hours that stretched between the night before last and this afternoon at four. Now it seemed little short of a miracle to him that at long last they were together again. To reach this moment he felt as though he had struggled through the rigours of a Commando's full training within the last twenty-four hours.

And with every precious moment borne past on two wings, despite each feeling effervescent with all they wanted to say to the other, all they could do was sit at the small table and smile to one another across it.

The waitress came and broke the spell: he gave the order in a lordly fashion. Then they laughed to one another and

he put his two hands across the table to take her small one.

"What did you do since we last met?" he asked. "It was ages ago, wasn't it?" His face darkened as he thought of the length of those ages. "We must never let so long elapse again, must we?—not unless we can possibly help it," he said, upset to realise that sometimes there might be even longer gaps between their farewells and their greetings. After all, he was in the army, and she—"What does your old man do?" he asked suddenly.

Gravely she looked at him. Now what did her father do? She drove him to docks on the Clyde, where his name acted as an open sesame, she drove him to works where his name was on every lorry, trolley and crane, she drove him to imposing offices in Glasgow where the brass plate told everyone who passed in the busy street that this was Saunders and Company. He was a bank director, had his name on every important board in Glasgow, business connections with London, Liverpool and Newcastle, as well as America before the war, headed most charity organisations with the handsomest subscriptions, knew not only what "the market" was doing but was most likely to do. What didn't her father do would be an easier way to answer that question!

"He does everything, if you know what I mean," she said, giving up the effort of trying to find one word to describe her father's far flung business activities.

The young man opposite noticed her hesitation.

"And you drive him?" he asked. He didn't want to probe, he just wanted to piece together something of her background.

"Yes, I drive him," she said eagerly. "To the works this morning, and it'll probably be the docks to-morrow."

A kind of jobbing fellow—or he might be in the plumbing line, something to do with pipes probably.

"But, Roger," she said with the earnestness he had begun to love, "I don't feel I'm doing nearly enough for the war. I'm in the conscripted class, you know, and instead of doing a full day's work, I'm just driving dad to his work,"—now and then she longed to add, but didn't because that might give a wrong impression of her father.

"Still," he braced her, "I wouldn't feel like that if I were you. After all, the authorities wouldn't let you drive your dad unless he was on vital work."

"Oh yes, he has to be driven," she agreed, "someone's got to drive him, but what I feel is, Roger——" She was looking at him with her deep blue eyes and pouring out tea (with a thrill he noticed she didn't ask him how he liked it this time, she remembered from last !). And she was thinking the happiness, the relief, of being able to discuss things like this, oh, sisters didn't know they were born who had brothers ! Cosily she pulled her chair farther into the table. "You see, Roger, what I feel is, I could do more than I am doing, for the war I mean, whereas someone else, who isn't so fit or even quite old, could drive dad."

"You mean you joining one of the services ?"

His manner was so direct it had the effect upon her rather of a sudden splash of cold spring water which she found pleasantly invigorating. She supposed she did mean joining one of the services but she realised now she had never got quite that length before. What she did not realise was that this was only natural because all her life she had been directed, sheltered, guided by her father, a man with a powerful personality. Because he would not hear of her going into one of the services, the idea had been automatically cancelled in Felicia's mind.

"And your dad doesn't want you to leave home and him ?" pondered Roger, trying to grasp the situation.

"Yes," she said, "that's it."

She was looking at him, wondering what he was going to say, suggest. Of course Roger couldn't realise that for her to leave home, to be "on her own" for the first time in her life, would call for more adjusting on her part than it would say on the part of most girls, accustomed to travelling to school by themselves, to visiting their friends, to rubbing shoulders with their fellows every day of their life. But she felt she would get the truth from Roger, with his clear-cut mind, unhampered by any preconceived notions that what was good enough for Tom, Dick or Harry, was not good enough for a Saunders—not by a long shot. Roger's friends, after all, would be Tom, Dick and Harry. What was good enough for them should be good enough for anyone, by his way of it.

"I want you to promise me something," he was saying.

"Promise you something ?" she repeated, startled.

"Yes, I want you to promise me you won't do anything about joining the services while I'm around here. I know

how you feel, you want to feel in things. And I know I'm being selfish, may be, exacting such a promise, but after all I won't be here indefinitely. Some of the boys were saying only yesterday, we should get our marching orders any day now."

His meeting her like this meant something to him, meant a great deal to him, meant in fact—she could read it from his nice eyes—everything to him. Joy at such a discovery was more than counter-balanced by his words about marching orders. It was almost as though a blast of cold wind had been allowed to enter a cosy room where lights glowed and a warm fire welcomed. Her heart suddenly stiffened and ached with foreboding.

"Where'll you be sent, Roger?"

"Oh, I dunno. It might be anywhere. We're needed everywhere." Pride in his regiment swelled his words. "Wherever something's gone wrong, the R.E.s are needed to put it right! And something's gone wrong everywhere, hasn't it! There's a fellow in my billet—he's Highland and a seventh son of a seventh son, which means he has second sight. Well, he had a dream the other night, and you'll never guess what he dreamed?" Felicia thought she could guess from Roger's conversation that he was accustomed to tell stories, all sorts of stories, fairy and "really truly" ones, to very much younger brothers and sisters. That sweet habit of his saying "You'll never guess" as he whetted up his audience! "He dreamed we were all pitching camp on a desert and there were domes and spires in the distance. Buster—he's my pal—said it would have been really helpful if Alistair had seen the Sphinx or something like that, to localise the place a bit!"

She couldn't laugh, she couldn't even "fix up" a smile, she could only stare at him, thinking, Perhaps the next time we meet you'll tell me you've got your marching orders. And as he gazed back at her he realised these meetings with him meant something, perhaps a great deal, to her. He used the bantering tone with which he was accustomed to ease his mother's sudden fears.

"Of course you never can tell with H.Q. You'll never guess what happened to Dick Lorent? He's a cousin of mine, dad's sister's eldest son. With red hair and just dancing to meet Jerry. Well, he joined the — Regiment, and after they were trained and fighting fit, they were all inoculated

against diseases you'd get in arctic zones. They thought we were perhaps going to invade Norway or mebbe they'd be sent to Russia. Then they were inoculated against tropical diseases. Well, you'll never guess where Dick's landed? In Wales!"

Of course she laughed at that. After all, Roger thought of her as "his girl." She knew he did. That's how he'd describe her to Buster and Alistair. "I'm off to meet my girl," he'd say. A soldier's girl didn't let her soldier down, never dreamt of letting him know just what she felt when she heard there was more than a chance that he would be sent overseas.

"Until I go," he said, serious again, "promise me you'll go on meeting me like this," and his hand tightened on hers.

"I promise," she whispered back over the table for two, "faithfully," she said, to make up for the silly faintness of her voice.

He could have kissed her feet for that "faithfully."

Those meetings at The Rose Bush! Neither knew how they lived until the next one took place. One upsetting day he arrived to find *their* table already taken, but their waitress soon put that right for him by tactfully offering the usurpers a window table. Their waitress was called Lily and they soon learnt all about her: that her "man" was working in the mills (her father's mills, thought Felicia) and that she had a little boy aged three called Jim. Her mother looked after Jim all day to let Lily return to her old work as a waitress and release a more mobile woman for war work. As for Lily, all she knew about them was that the tall young private and the pretty fair girl were simply bats about each other. Excitement and happiness fairly gladdened the air above table No. 15 when he sat opposite her at it. Just like her and big Jim when they were courting, thought Lily, entering "Service" to a clatter of plates and calling out "Tea for two."

Roger brought Felicia a copy of one of his mother's books. It was called *Honour Bright* and the one he liked best although it wasn't the one that had sold best. *Aftermath* had evidently done that, and then there were *The Broken Bond* and *When the Reed Breaks*." He reeled off a list of titles that made Felicia dizzy to hear. At this rate Mrs. Munro's pen could never be out of the ink-pot.

"It's a lovely name," said Felicia, tenderly touching the

book. "It means Honour Bright And Shining, doesn't it, Roger?"

"Yes, that's what it means and the heroine's name was Honor Bright. It was the one she had the least trouble over. She says she'll never forget *Aftermath*! It was written when all the kids were down with mumps and the kitchen pipes froze and there wasn't a drop of water in the house. It was all about a marriage that should have turned out all wrong but turned out beautifully right in the last page. The libraries couldn't get enough of it. We all get her titles for her. Prue wants the one she's on just now to be called *The Piper Paid with Lives*—long titles are fashionable just now—but Mother thinks that's too sad. Everything always comes right in her books at the end, you see—I mean all the right people die, or rather all the wrong ones do. What do you think about *Salvage* for it? That's my idea, but Mother wonders if that's not taking the paper saving campaign too far! But I like it—*Salvage*—it's a good ring to it, and you can't be too topical in times when yesterday's newspapers are behind the times to-day. I mean human *Salvage*, of course. It's all about people who find their niches for the first time in their lives in war-time."

The thrill of sitting with his mother's book in her hands and discussing with him the title for the one she was writing now! Never had Felicia felt she "belonged" so before. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright with excitement, her lips, red as rowan berries, bubbling over with laughter and all she had to say, suggest, talking faster and at greater length than they had ever talked in their life before.

He suddenly looked at her as she sat there opposite him. For all time she was going to be mirrored in his heart as she was at that moment. Three words jerked from him almost automatically, although he had never spoken them before.

"I love you."

Slowly she absorbed his words. He saw a shine about her face that he had only seen before on a Sunday morning at home when the sun came out, just before the church bells went. She took a long breath.

"I love you," she said in reply.

And they sat and looked at one another. Every day was a Sunday on his calendar at that moment and he heard every church bell in the world ring cascades of chimes in his ears.

"I'm going home at the week-end—that's to-morrow, Felicia—to tell mother about you," he said.

"And I'm going home to-night to tell dad about you," she said.

She flew up the avenue. Roger had never seen her home for that would shorten their precious short time together, always just seen her on to a bus before he caught a Number Eleven for the camp. She was so deliriously, intoxicatingly happy that no cloud or doubt shadowed her horizon, no difficulties loomed to fret her. Life, ringing with happiness, shone transparent as a fairy's wings before her enchanted eyes. She was so glad her father hadn't met Roger until she was sure of his love for her and her love for him. Now she could tell her wonderful news when he came home that night, double her happiness by knowing how pleased for her he would be.

But her father was already at home. Standing massive and genial in what was called the sun parlour, he saw her through the glass door speed down the corridor, her face radiant. Well seen she knew who was waiting for her! Barclay must have told her that Major Jules Trevere had called, was waiting to see her—Jules Trevere who had just asked if he could propose to his daughter.

"Here she comes," he said to the dark man behind him. Jules would go "over the top" with the sang froid and éclat of his profession and class, but Sir Miles thought he had scarcely ever seen so nervous a man at this moment!

His hand held the younger man's shoulder for a moment as he passed, to leave the room by the veranda. "Better for me to leave you alone," he remarked. He looked back at their visitor who had made an extraordinary gulping sound. This man was a lord's son, nervous because he was on the brink of proposing to his daughter!

"You know, Jules," he tried to brace him jokingly, "I think you are going to find things easier than you think!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"How lovely for you getting leave, Jules," said Felicia, and her little face looked wistfully happy as she thought, "Won't Roger and I feel rich when he gets leave!"

"By jove, isn't it?" he agreed readily. "Special leave, this, y'know. Might almost be called compassionate leave, I suppose!"

Jules making a joke! She was intrigued for him to know why he had got "special leave." Perhaps he had been given some high honour or something. Her father always said Jules Trevere made the finest type of officer, born and bred a soldier.

"Tell me, Jules!" she prompted, gay as a child who wants to know what is in "the other hand."

He took a step nearer her.

"Don't you know, Felly?" he demanded more than asked.

At the serious note in his voice, she looked wonderingly up at him. The smile slipped from her face as the realisation swept over her: Jules is going to propose to me.

Her thoughts panicked at that realisation. She didn't love Jules, she loved Roger—in sickness and in health, through parting and heart-break, for now and forever, until death them did part. . . . And because she was no longer merely a girl, because her love had transformed her into a woman, she could now add her own rider—and after.

But because she loved Roger, indeed because she loved him so very much, she was capable of feeling so sorry for Jules. She hated to hurt anyone, but Jules least of all—Jules, who, of all her father's friends, had always been so nice to her.

Now she knew why she had been upset receiving his birthday gift: unconsciously she had known such a present was a personal one, not the kind of present one sent to the daughter of one's friend. By accepting it, had she not, however inadvertently, given Jules reason to believe that she felt for him what he felt for her? She remembered thinking then it wasn't jewels that made a gift. Now she knew it wasn't Jules that made a gift, because she wasn't in love with him.

"Jules," she said, sitting down as though things had suddenly got too much for her, "your gift that you sent me on my birthday. It's beautiful, Jules, but you shouldn't have sent it to me——"

"It wasn't beautiful enough for you, Felly. Nothing any one could give you is. That's the only reason why I shouldn't have sent it to you."

She turned her fairness up to his dark face. He was not handsome but his extreme darkness saved him from being ordinary looking, added indeed an interest to his appearance that his rather commonplace personality in no way fulfilled.

"No, Jules," she said gently, "you shouldn't have sent it to me. Or rather, I should say, I shouldn't have accepted it." Gallantly she faced him. "I didn't realise when I did why you have come to see me to-day. I only realise why now, Jules."

With her father's last words still murmuring in his ears, Jules Trevere had some difficulty in finding his bearings.

"Felly," he said desperately, "I don't know what you're getting at. I've come to ask you to marry me."

He had never envisaged, of course, being limited in character and liking only to deal with what he was sure of, that Felly would refuse him. If he had thought that for one moment, he would never have proposed, for, in the language of the turf, he only backed "dead certs." Of course a lovely girl like Felly, with a wealthy parent—he'd always known men would be after her like bees round a honey-pot. But when that wealthy parent gave the impression you were the favoured one, naturally you took it for granted daughter was like father.

Now she was saying :

"I'm sorry, Jules, I'm terribly sorry, but I can't."

Astounded by being faced with the unpredictable when he had expected safe sailing, he could now only gaze at her, wondering what had gone wrong. He had always thought, of course, it would be him and Felly. It was most suitable : he knew all about her : everyone approved. Except, apparently, Felly.

Did he know her after all so well as he thought ? He wasn't so sure now. Good heavens, after this, he could be sure of nothing. Was knowing the girl of your heart liked ballet (and taking her to it although it bored you stiff), her

coffee half and half, and soft centres in her chocolates—was that *knowing* her?

"Felly." He advanced a step towards her. She had never looked so desirable as she did at this moment, he had never wanted her so much. Why, he had banked on her saying *yès*: she couldn't go and spoil everything by saying no, she couldn't, she mustn't. "Listen, Felly," he began insistently. And then he noticed something about her, something he had never seen her wear before, a brassy-looking regimental badge pinned on the lapel of her coat. "There's someone else," he said, his voice more of an accusation than a challenge.

"Yes," Felicia said steadily, "there's someone else, Jules."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you, Jules," she replied. "You see, daddy doesn't know. I was coming home to tell him to-day." She bit her lip. "He must be the first to know." Her gaze fell from his face. "You—you don't know him, Jules, neither does dad."

"No? Ah! I see."

Very much the soldier, he looked down at her. Good heavens, wasn't he taking Felicia too dead seriously? She was, after all, little more than a child. This was probably a mere flash in the pan affair, calf love, boy and girl—all that sort of thing. And all that sort of thing never lasted. Why, Jules could remember when he was twenty-one and that pretty girl in the yellow dress at the Richardsons' dance. Her name was Amy Grove and of course nothing came of it: his people had seen to that, and a jolly good thing too. If Felicia were just given time this other affair would blow over. Her father didn't even apparently know about the other man, and when he did, Jules could be bound he'd send him packing. At the thought of Sir Miles Saunders' massive personality behind him, Jules felt assured.

"I just want you to know, Felly, that I'll always be waiting for you," he said, and he couldn't help it if his voice did sound injured. "Promise me that," in the nick of time he changed the 'when' he wanted to say into "if you ever change your mind, you'll let me know."

"You know I will, Jules," she said, her eyes deepened like wet forget-me-nots, "you know I will. Only, Jules," she faltered, "that's promising you nothing, when I know I'll never change my mind."

That's exactly how he had felt about Amy Grove. The

more Felicia thought she was in love with "this other fellow" the quicker it would be all over and done with. He looked closer at the brooch in her coat and came to the conclusion, for he never did anything to precipitate as jump, that "this other fellow," whoever he was, wasn't up to much if all he could give Felicia was a trumpetty thing like that. They never were "up to much," these other fellows and the girl you fell in love with when you were twenty-one. That anyway, was the only comfort Jules could glean from the situation as he said to Felicia :

"You'll understand if I go now, won't you? Will you say *au revoir* to your father for me. No, I'd rather not see him. Well, good-bye, Felicia, for just now. You know I wish you—all the best—always. And you'll remember what you've promised, won't you?"

Jules' proposal and her necessary rejection had dimmed Felicia's happiness. She had felt so rich wrapped in Roger's love she wanted everyone else in the whole wide world to be as happy as she. And Jules had looked so wretched when he turned rather suddenly away, that she could not see his face, and left her.

So that when her father could finally contain himself no longer, the first thing he noticed when he entered the room was that most of the radiance he had seen lighting his daughter's face had gone now. The second was that she was alone. And in his surprise over the second he forgot about the first.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Where's Jules?"

She put her hand up to her hair as though to ease it from her brow.

"He's gone," she said, and, remembering, added, "He said I was to say *au revoir* to you from him."

"Gone?" repeated her father. "Gone where?" His face cleared, as he thought what a fool he'd been! Of course! "You mean, he's away 'phoning about the celebration party to-night?"

"No," she said, "I don't mean that. I mean he's gone home."

She was so troubled with her own thoughts, she did not notice the effect her words were having upon her father, until he cracked out the three words:

"Gone home? Why?"

She looked up to see him eyeing her with an eye that gleamed with coldness. Of course it must sound terrible to her father, the most hospitable of men, who knew Jules had come to see them on his first day of leave, to learn that he had left the house without even a cup of tea.

"Oh, daddy," she said, accustomed to go to him when in trouble, "I'm so worried. And it all can't be helped, but that doesn't make it any the less worrying. You see, Jules came this afternoon to propose to me, and I couldn't accept him——"

"Why not?"

She had seen her father preoccupied before, but never had she heard him speak like this to her, never.

"Why not?" she faltered. She suddenly straightened herself where she stood and when she spoke her voice no longer faltered. "I was coming home this afternoon to tell you," she explained, and at the thought of Roger some of the radiance flickered again across her feeling little face. "I couldn't accept Jules, you see, daddy, because I'm in love with someone else."

"In love with someone else." Ominously his voice lowered as his lips straightened. "Indeed. So you've refused Jules Trevere because you're in love with someone else. And is it permitted to ask you who the someone else happens to be?"

"Of course it is, daddy. I was going to tell you all about him." Oh, everything was happening all wrong, happening like this. Her father was making her feel guilty about Roger, and she refused to be made guilty. She had nothing to be ashamed of and everything to be proud of, thinking of Roger. "His name is Roger Munro," she said clearly, "and his mother writes books."

"His name is Roger Munro and his mother writes books." In his sun parlour, the father's astounded thoughts scattered to build themselves into a photograph looking out at him from the place of honour on a shabby mantelpiece—the photograph of a man in private's uniform, his forage cap stuck on at a cock-sure angle. And in his ears a woman's agreeable voice sounded again, "To have a son at exactly the same age that his father was when I met him."

With the recollection of the mother, his thoughts circumscribed a dangerous circle. Moisture suddenly dampened his brow as he remembered thinking, in the drawing-room, of

that tuppence ha'penny villa, that he had her in a cleft stick. Who was caught in the cleft stick now? Writhing at the thought, he wanted to lash out cruelly, to hurt as he was hurt. They said a chain was as strong as its weakest link. His weakest link had been found with unerring dexterity, his Samson flaw revealed.

So this nobody was trying to square accounts with Miles Saunders by attempting to marry his cherished daughter. Well, her father could see his little game, and what was more—would put a stop to it.

"And where did you meet this Roger Munro?" he asked.

"Outside, daddy," she said eagerly, so glad that terrible "mounting up" silence was at last broken, "on the road just outside our gates. On my birthday, my *real* birthday," she amplified diffidently. "His lorry—the army lorry he was driving, I mean, had broken down and I went to help him. He's in the Royal Engineers and is the eldest of his family——"

He was no longer listening. It was worse than he thought. This quite unspeakable fellow wasn't trying to square accounts. He and his mother were apparently unaware they had been what they would call "done." Sir Miles was a business man and knew those who did keen business had quite a different vocabulary from those upon whom the keen business was practised. Felicia had met this man on her birthday, her *real* birthday, the very day her father had interviewed Mrs. Munro. It was then a coincidence that the young man she went to help happened to be, of all people, that woman's son. Again that unfortunate symbol of the cleft stick rose before his eyes. His emotions were rising dangerously, and as was always the way with him when this happened, he, to the outward eye, became quiet to an excessive extent, while his thoughts calculated nimbly behind this deadly bland façade. A cleft stick forsooth! He'd break anything before it broke him—anything. And he did not stop to think that anything might include his daughter's heart.

"Listen, Felicia," he interrupted, "nothing will ever make me countenance anything between you and this man, and that's final."

"Why?"

He turned, his uncreased brow frowning to look at her in surprise. No one ever dared to question his orders, whatever they might think about them privately. Felicia he would

have thought would have been the last to break so hard and fast a rule.

"Why?" he demanded peremptorily. "I'll tell you why soon enough. Because I don't approve of him or of you having anything to do with him, and that's that."

"No, it isn't, daddy. And you can't say you either approve or disapprove of him until you've met him, and know him."

What he had forgotten was that Felicia, despite the gentle sweetness of character and temperament, must have something of himself in her, something of himself he was confronting for the first time in his life, something that would not be gainsaid, or pushed aside by mere pressure of personality. But he refused to recognise this something because he refused to take into consideration that she was in love. His daughter in love with a penniless ninicomp in a private's uniform! He had never heard anything so ridiculous. Of course she thought she was, but the sooner the better she got these moon-struck ideas out of her head and her thoughts diverted into a sensible and suitable channel. "A sensible and suitable channel" ran, of course, in the only direction Sir Miles decided it to run—towards Jules Trevere.

"Listen, Felicia," he said again, "I do not, nor shall I ever, sanction any kind of friendship between you and this man, whom you met without introduction or guarantee of any kind. Believe me, that type of man is never harmless. He 'picked' you up, didn't he, knowing absolutely nothing about you? Well, are you fool enough to think this is the first time he's done that, or that it'll be the last? Let me, who has lived in the world a great deal longer than you have, tell you that no good can possibly come out of so haphazard and unsuitable a beginning. I've heard quite enough from you about this man to know that he is the last type I could wish you to have anything to do with. That is my mind and these are my wishes. It is up to you to respect them. I shall not discuss the matter further with you, nor do I wish it alluded to again. For you to have anything to do with this man is out of the question."

He left the room there and then, before Felicia began to question what he had said perfectly plainly was out of the question. For the first time in his life he was faced with a situation with which he did not know how to deal.

He was inclined to gibe at himself a little later for allowing himself to get worked up; of course Felicia would come to

her pretty senses whenever she realised that what she was doing was going to affect her father adversely. She was devoted to him, the bond between them was stronger than between even the most loving fathers and daughters. After all, she had always only had him and he had only her—now. His thoughts jogged him as they neared forbidden ground.

And Felicia stood in the sun parlour after she was left alone, wondering a little wildly what she was going to do now. Wait until she saw Roger, of course. Roger would have to know that her father didn't approve of their friendship, was likely to put every obstacle he could think of in their way. Yes, wait until Monday when she saw Roger. At the thought of his calmness as she told him everything, of the dependable way he held his shoulders, of her hand lying in his warm brown one, her excited runaway thoughts slackened speed and were soothed.

Roger sat on the top of the bus jolting towards Glasgow, thinking of the news he had to tell his mother. What news! That he had met the love of his heart on the king's high road, just as though she were straight out of a story-book, that he loved her and she loved him. He began to whistle below his breath at the very thought of everything.

He didn't know how he was going to keep still until they arrived at the garage in Killermont Street. He felt explosive with excitement over his news, as though he would burst like a cracker before the party if he didn't tell someone soon. This must really be about the slowest bus on the road. In fact he looked out once or twice, just to discover if they really were moving! His watch too seemed to be sticking, for it hardly seemed to move each time he looked at it, so that he kept holding it, frowning a bit, to his ear to hear if it were still going. He took everything out of his pockets and turned it over to make the time pass quicker; a key for something he had forgotten what and had long since lost, a red and a blue ticket to admit him into one of Glasgow's public libraries, a cigarette card from pre-war days he'd always forgotten to give Tim, a blob of sealing wax, and his mother's last letter.

He caught another bus in Glasgow that belled and jingled him out to the suburb of Princes Park. At Smart's, the tobacconist's corner, he rattled down the twisted bus stairs in his heavy boots and walked down a quiet road with a

red gravel walk. The red gravel walk narrowed into an ordinary suburban road, with small semi-detached villas looking at each other across a hotch-potch of small front gardens. Roger felt he would like to shout and bring the world gloriously about his ears, because he was home again with wonderful news to tell them all. At the hotch-potchiest of them all, he paused and pushed open the creaking gate, thinking, as he thought each time he used it, I must mend this gate before I'm much older! He took the garden path in three of his long strides and opened the front door. He could hear a meal was in full progress. He called out "Hullo, everybody," and the clattering of plates, the busy chatter was suspended. Someone crowed, "It's Roger!" and there was a stampede for the hall.

Small boys in darned jerseys, small girls in print frocks—there were only four of them all told, but really there might have been forty, all throwing themselves at their "big brother." And Roger, laughing, teasing, good-humoured, struggled through them to the dining-room.

"Hullo, Mother!" he said.

She saw him standing there, her son, her eldest son, at the same age that she had met his father.

"Oh, Roger," she said as she kissed him, "I think you're an answer to prayer."

"Well," he remarked as he sat down at table, "I've been called many things in my life, but I think this is the first time I've ever been called that!"

He fitted in at once to the family pattern, just as though he had never been away. Someone ran to the kitchen for an extra plate, and a high little voice was heard to pipe out contentedly to Jennie, the maid, that was Roger home again. Jennie, a wispy creature, all legs and arms, was so shy that her presence was usually only made known in the household by "noises off." An extra person had not of course been catered for, but the Munros solved everything in their own way. Everyone "sympathised" something from their own plate for their visitor's.

"Do you like fat?" Jill demanded. "Oh no, don't take it if you don't like it. Neither do I, so I understand."

"Look here, Prue," expostulated Roger, smacking a boiled potato back on to her plate, "I wouldn't dream of taking your Murphy with a 'stamp' on it!" Helped by all and sundry as they loved him, he had to hold his plate

in the air that no one else could heap anything more on it. "This," he protested, "is fair ridiculous!"

They laughed uproariously at the family joke. Their mother had once thrown money out of the window to a man playing the pipes in the street below. He had stopped playing to pick up what she had so lavishly thrown out to him. Looking up at the window she had heard him protest in his canny Scotch way, "Mum, this is fair ridiculous!"

Roger home again—when she needed him most. His mother looked thankfully across the table at him. Private life of course was quite unknown in the Munro household: nobody had ever waited to discuss things "after the children were in bed." Besides she would have to tell Roger now when he was home only for an hour or two. They lived as a community where there was no youngest or eldest, but all shared alike, from conversation to the letters from Postie.

"Roger," she said now, "I'm so worried. You *are* an answer to prayer, coming unexpectedly like this, to-day of all days! But of course I don't think anything's unexpected, if you know what I mean. I'm sure it's all planned for us. Roger, you know the Sharon Lane property? Well, such a nice man called at the house and enquired about it. A Sir Miles Saunders."

"I never liked him," pronounced Tim, over the edge of his mug.

"No, I know you didn't, dear," replied his mother, looking helplessly at Roger, "but he seemed very nice. A gentleman, of course. He offered me eight hundred for the property——"

"Of course you went and saw Mr. Marshall before you fixed anything?" enquired Roger.

"No, dear, I didn't. I know I should, but I didn't. I'm so tired of Mr. Marshall telling me to retrench when I've nothing to retrench on, if you know what I mean. He's always such a damp blanket and I felt if he knew I was getting this eight hundred, the next thing would be he would be telling me what to do with it—or rather what not to do with it. So I never told him, and was keeping it as such a beautiful *bonne-bouche* to tell you, when Jennie told me Mr. Marshall was on the 'phone this morning. You'll never guess what it was to tell me. To congratulate me on selling the property for twenty thousand pounds, and to tell me he would put the money in the best securities for us. I thought

he was joking at first, but I might have known Mr. Marshall couldn't joke about anything, money least of all."

"Never mind, mother," Roger comforted her, "there must be some mistake. Mr. Marshall must have got it wrong."

"No, dear, Mr. Marshall is one of these people who never make mistakes. He's always so tiresomely sure of his facts. I told him of course about the man who had called—the Sir Miles somebody—I wasn't sure of his name until I found his card which Jennie had put below the jar with tapers, and of course I had to tell him about the eight hundred——"

"Poor mother," said Roger.

"He said of course—well, of course, dear, he wouldn't have been human if he hadn't inferred that it 'served me right' not getting in touch with them. I'm glad, anyway," she said with some spirit, "that Mr. Marshall is at least that much human! But he said we could do nothing about it, if the deeds of sale were quite regular and the money accepted. Of course that man's done me, Roger."

"Evidently."

He pushed his chair back from the table as he looked at her. Twenty thousand—for the first time in her life to have some capital behind her, not pent up waiting for the next cheque, her feet never quite cleared because of dentists' bills and grocers' accounts—writing, writing, writing, and never able to overtake herself.

"And Mr. Marshall said there's nothing we can do. He's such a defeatist. It was he who said that man had done me, but, Roger, he seemed so nice and agreeable, agreed Marshall and Maitland were a good firm——"

"I never liked him," Tim reminded them all again.

"I'll try and get off on Monday to come through and see him," remarked Roger, trying to frown it all out. "There may be some explanation. When he knows the full circumstances——"

He looked across at his mother and was reassured: no one would surely dream of "doing" her: and if they did. . . . The hand on his knee slowly clenched.

CHAPTER FIVE

"OH, ROGER, if you only would," his mother breathed gratefully. "Perhaps, as you say, there is an explanation." She looked across the table at him: she was his mother before he was her eldest son: his needs came before hers. Sweetly she smiled to him. "Now, we won't waste your precious time home talking about business. We want to hear all about you. How are things going with you, Roger?"

He saw them all watching him over their mugs and the edges of their spoons.

"Grand, simply grand," he informed them, top of his notch.

"Have you been made a general yet?" demanded Jill.

He kissed her ear before he whispered in it, "Pretty near it! You wait till you see who I'm bringing home one of these days!" He looked back at his mother. "That's how it makes you feel, doesn't it?" he asked. "Decorated all over. Being in love, I mean," he explained just in case she wasn't following. "Mother, I've met her!"

"Met her?" questioned his mother, feeling she must surely be a little stupid. "Who, dear?"

"The girl I love, mother." His brown eyes fired his face, making him look so like his father when she used to sit opposite him that she nearly cried out. "Her name's Felicia. Isn't that a pretty name? Oh, I'm longing so for you to meet her. If I brought her through on Sunday week, mother, would that be all right? I know you'll love her. She lives at Raldon—with her father, her mother's dead. I haven't met him yet, and although Felicia has never said anything, I think he sounds a queer old bird. Felicia has never been anywhere much—not to Largs or any place like that. Oh, I'd love to give her such a good time, mother, with us all—you know, a holiday and a half, like we used to have. An only child hasn't much fun, y'know," he said wisely.

"Roger, dear, I'm so glad." He knew she would be. "Of course bring her through on Sunday week, I'm longing to meet her." She smiled to him in her understanding way. "If she's even half of what you think she is, she'll do!" she said.

"Mother, she's double! Wait till you see her. I couldn't begin to tell you what she's like——"

"That's how poems and books are written, Roger," said his mother, "men beginning to write what they feel."

"Will I like her?" Prue asked suddenly.

"Of course you will, Prue," assured Roger. "Good heavens, there would have to be something mighty far wrong with anyone who didn't like my Felicia. You've not got something mighty far wrong with you, have you!"

"That's not the point," said Denys, a great believer in calling a spade a spade, "the point is: will she like us?"

"Goodness gracious," exclaimed Jill, "I never thought of that!" and she clapped her small hand over her mouth, so taken aback was she at the idea.

"Of course she'll like you, you silly mutts," said Roger, laughing in spite of himself.

Tim was the only member of the family who did not chatter incessantly, so that when he did make a remark, he was listened to with some respect. Now he put down his mug on the table with both hands to say:

"If she likes you, why shouldn't she like us?" and slid from the table to show that audience was over.

Roger found himself looking at them all—his family, the family he was going to introduce Felicia to a week on Sunday, if she could come, and his heart swelled with pride at the thought of their meeting Felicia and her meeting them, specially his mother. Poor darling Felicia who couldn't remember, had never seen her own mother.

"Don't you worry about the Sharon Lane property," he said to her as he kissed her good-bye. "I'll go and see this bloke on Monday if I can get off. I mayn't manage to come home but I'll write you immediately—wire if it's good news."

He put the bloke's visiting-card into his pocket, taking it out on Monday when he arrived in Glasgow to see the address. Sir Miles Saunders ran the script printed on the white card, and a business address in St. Vincent Street. When Roger arrived there, it was to find the business address comprised a lofty five-storeyed building, so vast it was like a block in itself. This Sir Miles must be a very wealthy man when he was at home, Roger thought as he ascended the stairs, and he wondered for a moment what it would feel like to be as rich as all that. A bit entombed in your own

possessions, he came to the conclusion, crossing the echoing reception-hall.

"Appointment?" enquired the supercilious "young lady" behind the counter when he announced he wished to see Sir Miles Saunders.

"No," replied Roger, knowing full well that she knew perfectly well he had no appointment. "But you ring him up. He'll see me when he knows who I am." He spoke all the more assuredly because he was beginning to be anything but sure that the head of the firm would see him.

"Sir Miles never sees anyone except by appointment, but I'll try his secretary," said the young lady, going languidly to the telephone. "What name shall I say?" She "contacted" someone through the telephone. "Is that Mr. Fenwick? Well, there's a man here waiting to see Sir Miles. He says his name's Private Roger Munro. Yes, I'll hold on. Yes, Mr. Fenwick? What's that? Sir Miles will see him? Yes, I'll send him up—straight away."

"You're not more surprised than yours truly," thought Roger, tucking his forage cap inside his shoulder-strap as he shot upstairs in the well-equipped elevator. He followed the uniformed lift-boy down a well-carpeted corridor and was placed in a waiting-room until that time "the boss," "the guv'nor," "the high heid yin" saw fit to receive him in his private sanctum. He still felt a little startled at getting even this length, but when he was kept "cooling his heels" for well over half an hour, he realised he had missed the bus back to Raldon he had intended to catch.

He was shown at last into a room so beautifully appointed with every comfort it was more like a room in a private house than an office, except for the three telephones on the leather topped desk. Behind it sat a massive man, his handsome head bent as he studied some printed papers in his hands. It was an appreciable time before he deigned to raise his head and demand of his visitor, "Well?"

He had at last forced himself to look at him—at the man who had stolen Felicia's heart from her father's safe keeping, who was demanding to see him. Well, and Sir Miles' gleaming lips straightened, he would see him all right.

So this was the man Felicia imagined she was in love with! This long drink of water in ill-fitting battle-dress, who looked exactly what he was—out of a tuppence ha'penny villa in a dull suburb, where he would return after the war was over.

"I've come," said Roger, approaching to the edge of the wide table, and looking at whom he dubbed to himself as Business Potentate Number One, "to see you, sir, about my mother. You remember you called on her some two months ago about her Sharon Lane property?"

Astounded, Sir Miles looked at him. So the whipper-snapper had come about *that*, not about Felicia. He realised, for he was nothing if not shrewd, that his visitor didn't know he was Felicia's father: if he had, his "approach" would have been quite different. With an eye bright with malice, he surveyed the young private.

"Well?" he said urbanely.

"You—she—put through the deal without consulting her lawyers. They 'phoned her up to congratulate her getting it sold at the price of twenty thousand pounds."

"Well?" Business Potentate Number One asked agreeably once more.

"Well," said Roger, "perhaps it hasn't been sold for twenty thousand pounds. Perhaps they made a mistake. You only gave her eight hundred for it, didn't you?"

Sir Miles bowed his head to acknowledge that so he had.

"Well," demanded Roger, "has there been a mistake? Have you re-sold the property at twenty thousand pounds?"

Sir Miles flicked open the lid of a cigar box lying beside his hand and remarked:

"I have."

The smoother, the better humoured, the more urbane the man behind the desk became, the less Roger liked him. I'm with Tim, he thought grimly to himself, I dislike you very much.

"Well," he demanded, rattled as he felt everything was anything but well, "doesn't nineteen thousand two hundred pounds strike you as rather a grotesque profit to make off a woman over the one transaction?"

Business Potentate Number One refused to be roused.

"No profit is grotesque," he said, as though considering the other's point of view, "unless the other party pockets it. You may not believe it and I don't really care whether you do or not," but the provoking thing was Roger did believe him, "nineteen thousand two hundred pounds mean nothing to me. It is a mere bagatelle as a matter of fact. What is your mother complaining of?"

"She's not complaining. I'm here to do it for her. I've no father and I'm her eldest son."

Sir Miles Saunders suddenly turned his head away. When he looked at him again, Roger saw his face was as bland, as imperturbably and politely bored, as it had been since he entered.

"And what does Mrs. Munro's eldest son wish done?" he asked.

Roger, since he couldn't take a step nearer, leant over the wide table.

"What do you think should be done, sir?" he demanded tersely.

He found the other man eyeing him with cold distaste.

"I'll give back your mother her piece of property," he was saying, "and she can return my eight hundred. That'll finish the matter."

Be done with them, once and for all, he was thinking, not have even a commercial link between them. He could substitute another piece of ground to Tarpaulins Limited, a more suitable piece.

"Thanks," Roger said shortly, wondering if this would be good or bad news for his mother, whether he should wire or send a letter.

"Sharon Lane is not the only strip of property for sale," said the man behind the desk, smiling as though amused at something.

"Perhaps you'll get the next piece for five hundred," blurted out Roger. He shouldn't have said that and he knew it, but he felt he would do anything to wipe that smile from the face of this handsome man who knew they were hard up, that his mother would be disappointed at the loss of her eight hundred, that she had already planned how it was to be spent.

"Perhaps," agreed the hateful man, still smiling.

"Good-day," said Roger, since there was nothing more to discuss, and he wheeled on his heel to go to the door.

As he did so, his cuff caught the edge of a folding photograph frame on Sir Miles' desk and upset it. He muttered his apologies at his clumsiness, putting out his hand to pick it up and thinking as he did so that he would not have expected a hard business nut like Sir Miles Saunders to have such a soft spot for any one that he kept their photograph on his desk. He flapped the folder open to make it stand upright.

As he did so, he could not help seeing it contained two photographs facing each other, one of a very beautiful woman, the other of a girl little more than a child. He kept the folder in his hand as he stared down at the photograph. For it was Felicia he saw looking back at him.

"Put that photograph down."

Wonderingly, Roger looked from it to the man, who had risen behind the desk. Saunders—why of course—Felicia's second name was Saunders, wasn't it? Then this man must be her father. But he had always thought Felicia's old man was in a jobbing line of business, that they were poorly off and that was why she had never been "down the water." It was something in the nature of a shock to realise that Felicia's words about her father, "He does everything," were meant to be taken literally, not figuratively. Sir Miles Saunders was not only at the head of everything, he was the head.

"You're—you're Felicia's father?" questioned Roger, feeling so taken aback that he asked for corroboration for what he could scarcely believe.

"Put that photograph down."

Sir Miles was a big man and it was a characteristic that his joviality, his smiling good-temper, the benignity his very presence pervaded made him appear larger, as though he did everything with both hands. For now, when he was no longer jovial, when his temper was anything but good and his glance the opposite of benign, a curious change had come over him. His frame was still large, but he no longer was a tower of bonhomie. It was as though anger had drained him of every attribute that swelled him into the man his servants and associates saw every day, leaving behind only what was inflexible and hard as bone.

"All right," said Roger, putting down the photograph on the desk-table while he gazed at him curiously, realising he was "up" against something he had never met in his life, "I'll put it down." He gave a short laugh to try to get his bearings. "I didn't know you were Felicia's father," he said. "She's told you about me, hasn't she?"

Of course Felicia had: otherwise he realised he would never have been allowed over the threshold of Sir Miles Saunders' private sanctum. That explained that look of cold distaste Roger had seen gleaming from the other man's eye when it rested on him.

"She's told me about you."

"Well, obviously you don't approve, do you?" Roger said awkwardly, wishing Felicia's father would give him a little more to go on than repeating his own words after him. "Of course, no one's good enough for Felicia, is there?" Like everyone in the Munro family, he always went quite ungrammatical when nervous. "I mean—she's so wonderful, isn't she?" His face glowed at the thought of Felicia's wonder, as though some of her shine had fallen upon him. "I can't tell you what I felt when I knew she loved me as I love her."

"Because you are quite unsuitable for my daughter is not to say every other man is."

"And why am I unsuitable for your daughter?"

Sir Miles Saunders was not accustomed to be met, fairly and squarely, on his own ground. Few men were his equals, and few men would take the chance of committing what might be called a trespass. But Roger Munro, out of a "tuppence ha'penny villa," had different ideas of what was encroachment and what was not.

"Granted you don't know much about me," he continued, "but you've met my mother. You can pull me to bits, but you can't her, can you?"

"I never waste energy attempting to do what can't be done," remarked Sir Miles, his smile disagreeable upon his lips. "Let it suffice to make it quite clear to you that I shall never sanction my daughter having anything to do with you, never, and that's final."

"Look here," said Roger, unaware that Felicia's father was not accustomed to be told to look anywhere, "you were in love with your wife, weren't you, when you married her?"

He was not prepared for the effect his words would have upon Sir Miles, who shook with the intensity of his feelings.

"Don't dare—don't you ever dare to speak of her to me."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm terribly sorry," Roger said quietly. Of course he should have remembered Felicia telling him the first time they met that her mother died when she was born and her father "can't forget." "All I meant to say was you wouldn't have stopped having anything to do with the woman you loved just because her father didn't like you, would you?"

"I," returned Sir Miles, "am a totally different proposition to you."

"But what makes you different?" demanded Roger. "The only thing I can think of is that you've got money and I haven't. But money isn't everything. In fact it's the least of everything. You can't buy happiness, or love, or another man's respect."

"I shall not make a list why I consider you are unsuitable in every way for my daughter," replied Sir Miles, "such facts are obvious to anyone. I shall only repeat that I shall never, under any circumstances whatsoever, agree to her having anything to do with you. I wish to hear nothing further from you. Go now—and quickly."

"I'm going," Roger said, his voice low and intent as the other man's, "I'm going—just before I forget you're Felicia's father," and he swung from the room.

Sir Miles stood after he had gone, his heavy hand beating once or twice upon the leather top of his desk. Then he lifted up the middle one of the three telephones and gave a number. It was a private, not a business number and a long distance call, to a country district some way out of Manchester, but it was only a matter of minutes before he was "put through."

"Hallo, Daisy, is that you?" he asked, his face easing to know he had been lucky enough to find his sister in. He was always lucky, and by jove, his luck would still hold now when more was at stake than ever before. He'd see it would hold. "This is Miles speaking. Listen, Daisy," his voice lowered, "I'm in bad trouble. It's Felicia. No, no, she isn't ill. I can't go into it over the 'phone. What's that? Good gracious no! I'd like to see the labour exchange that would put me off my sleep! No, no, it's about—er—a man. Quite unsuitable. Er, Daisy, I feel this is something a woman will have to handle. Can you come up straight away and bring Rosemary? It would be nice for Felicia to have company. My dear, that is good of you. You know I will make it well worth your while. Nothing is too soon for me—the day after to-morrow then. And, Daisy, are you there? Better not let Felicia know why you're coming north. I'll say you've been in touch with me and Rosemary is feeling out of sorts, so you thought the change would do her good, eh?"

The Rose Bush fairly hummed with activity when Felicia

pushed open the door that evening : indeed, it was so crowded and noisy she hardly heard the little bell tinkle her approach. Even before she looked, she knew Roger hadn't yet arrived. That was one of the wonderful, magical properties of love. One lived on a plane that had nothing to do with the five senses, or perhaps where the five senses were so sharpened they made a sixth, a sense that told you when he was thinking particularly about you, and other intimate little things about him, so that you knew without being told he liked gravy and his egg turned.

This was the first time she had ever arrived and he hadn't been waiting for her. The table for two had both chairs leaning against it with their hind legs kicking the air. Roger had booked it when they were last there, when he had told her he loved her and she had told him she loved him. She straightened one chair and sat down, telling Lily she would wait to be served until Mr. Munro arrived.

This was the first time she had ever had a chance to look round the Rose Bush properly : with Roger sitting opposite her, she so seldom strayed out of the enchanted circle of his brown eyes. The restaurant was bigger, somehow, than she had imagined, the kind of restaurant where a boy took his girl at this time for a "bite of something" before they went to the pictures together, and where, in the middle of the day, married daughters met their mothers to discuss baby's symptoms or quite remarkable powers of observation.

A girl, studiously avoiding Felicia's gaze, sat with a young man at a small table against the wall. Something about her was vaguely familiar to Felicia and she felt she would be teased until she discovered where she had seen her face. Of course ! She had seen her to-day, as she had yesterday, and would to-morrow. It was Annie, one of the housemaids at Newstones, whom she hadn't recognised immediately because she was out of her trim uniform. Annie looking so nice, Felicia thought sweetly, unaware that Annie, with a feather in her hat and a plain utility coat, everything matching, had tried to make herself look as like "Miss Felicia" as shillings could look like pounds. Felicia now studied the man she was with, just to see if he were nice enough for Annie : he looked very nice, she came to the conclusion, older than he probably was because, like most of his generation, he was losing his hair in the front much sooner than his father had. Must be in a reserved occupation, thought

Felicia, for he wasn't in uniform, and she felt so glad for Annie's sake.

"What d'you think's keeping your boy friend?" Lily asked chattily, polishing some tumblers at her table. "Not like him this, is it? But don't you worry," she said kindly, anxious that Felicia shouldn't think she thought it was simply a case of not "showing up," "something real bad must have happened to keep him, like C.B. or wind of the invasion, or mebbe a bomb or something going off at practice."

Annie and her escort had left, and the tea-room had thinned of most of its *habitués*. Felicia ordered a pot of tea, just to give herself something to do while she waited. She waited until she knew Roger couldn't possibly be coming, because he must be due back at the camp by this time. She had waited hours and he hadn't come. She could not have made a mistake about the day, because Lily had booked the table for them, just as he had ordered. What could have kept him, then, what could have kept him? Her mind whirled like a wheel, every alternative a different spoke.

It was funny to get on to the bus without feeling his lips upon her face for that last hurried kiss. There was only one seat vacant and Felicia slipped into it, to find she was sitting beside Annie.

"Oh, hallo, Annie," she said in her nice way. "I saw you at the Rose Bush to-night, didn't I? Annie, can I say how very nice your young man looks." Always such a lady, Miss Felicia, Annie thought, wrapped in a glow of pride at having a mistress like Miss Felicia and a "young man" like her Ted. "What does he do?" she asked interestedly.

"He's one of the key men in your father's factory," Annie said, "over woollen textiles he is, and can't be spared for the front. But it goes against the grain, Miss Felicia. You know what men are. Always harping. And me never done telling him that the soldiers wouldn't have a stitch to put on their backs if he was at the front. And what would be the good of that? I ask him. But you know what men are, Miss Felicia."

Of course Miss Felicia knew what men were. There was Jean after her night out, saying she had seen Miss Felicia at the Rose Bush with the tallest private ever. And there was Major Jules Trevere, whom everyone below stairs had always thought Miss Felicia would marry, out of the house when he called on Friday without even tasting one of Cookie's

sandwiches she was getting ready for him in double quick time. And the Master not himself all week-end. Yes, certainly if anyone should know what men were it would be Miss Felicia.

"Hallo, daddy," Felicia greeted her father, before she went upstairs to take off her outdoor clothes. Of course he would want to know where she had been.

"Hallo, darling," he replied. "By the way, your Aunt Daisy was on the 'phone to-day. Rosemary's out of sorts and she would like her to have a breath of northern air, so they're both coming up on Wednesday."

"Oh, Wednesday, yes, I see," Felicia said. Her head ached so that she felt she had to repeat everything before she understood it correctly. "I'm sorry about Rosemary," she said, and, "it will be nice to see them."

"Yes, won't it? You don't look too good yourself. Where were you? You know if there's anything I object to it's having dinner with myself for company."

"I know, daddy, I'm so sorry. I was meeting Roger."

His face set into the hardness of a stone cast at that name.

"Indeed?"

"Yes." Her breath seemed to run down. She had to confide in someone, there was always only her father. "Daddy, we were to meet at The Rose Bush as usual but he wasn't there. He didn't come."

"No? Well, I don't wonder. Your precious Roger came to see me to-day and I told him I would never sanction you having anything to do with him, never. He must have taken my words to heart. That's about the first good thing I've heard about——"

She wasn't listening. The wheel was going round and round in her head with a deadening slowness. It was no longer whirring with spokes, so many she couldn't count them all. It had only one now. He hadn't come because he thought her father was right. She would never see him again.

CHAPTER SIX

"THAT'S a 'phone call for you, Miss Felicia," Annie came into the morning-room to tell her next morning. "Mr. Roger Munro," and brightly she watched Miss Felicia's face, to confirm if she could from it, if that were the name of the "tallest private ever."

"Thank you, Annie," replied Felicia. "I'll take it in my bedroom," for there were telephones in practically every room at Newstones that the master of the house could answer business calls with as little disturbance as possible.

As Felicia climbed the stairs to her beautiful bedroom, she told herself she had known this morning when she lay awake in the greying dawn that Roger would get in touch with her, to say good-bye, but she had expected somehow it would be by letter, not by telephone. She wondered how she was going to bear to hear his voice telling her it was all for the best, her father was right, it was wiser they should never meet again.

"Hallo, Felicia! Is that you, darling?" His strong vigorous voice reached her ear, and she had time to think it was quite unlike the voice of a heart-broken lover who was telephoning to wish the girl of his heart good-bye—for always. "Did you get my telegram?"

"Telegram?" she repeated faintly.

"Yes. Or rather Lily. I found I couldn't possibly make our appointment yesterday, darling. I nearly split myself in two trying to. But I had to go to Glasgow and was held up. So I wired Lily to explain to you—only I didn't know Lily's second name! Had to send it to Lily, The Rose Bush!" That glorious gurgle of laughter like water coming out of a carafe! "Don't say you never got my message?" And I paid one-and-ten for that telegram, he thought. "It can't have reached Lily, then. I'm terribly sorry, darling, but when I didn't turn up, you knew it must have been something drastic, something I simply couldn't help, that kept me away, didn't you?"

"Yes, darling." If he had seen her face then he would have thought it more than ever like a spring morning, for it was shining through happy tears. "Lily said—to comfort me, you know—that you must either have got C.B. to be

detained, or perhaps a bomb or something had gone off at practice."

A complete carafe of water was emptied at the other end of the telephone.

"Darling," he was serious now, grave, "I saw your father yesterday."

"Yes, Roger."

"It was the strangest thing, I went to see him about a—er—business matter of my mother's. I never, of course, associated him with you. It was only when I saw your photograph on his desk that I knew he was your father."

"Yes, Roger."

"He doesn't like me of course, Felicia. Perhaps that's only to be expected, but I wish he had. Even a little. And I was upset and didn't try very hard to make him."

"He didn't like you even before he saw you, Roger," she said, her lips dry. "I told him, you see, just as we planned after we parted on Friday. I think—he hoped it would be someone else."

"You bet he did." The nice voice sounded bitter. "Anyone but me. Felicia," he was forcing himself to ask her, to know her answer even if it meant pulling his world to bits for all time, "Felicia, are you going to let that make any difference to you and to me?"

And all she could say was:

"I love you, Roger. Nothing—no one—can ever make a difference to that."

"Oh, Felicia." He groaned with relief and thrust his forage cap from his brow damp with sweat. "Darling, I've told Mother and she's longing to meet you. Would next Sunday suit you? But we must meet before that. What about to-morrow?"

"I can't, Roger. An aunt and my cousin are arriving then to stay with us. Oh, it's all so difficult, isn't it? I'll need to be with them on Thursday too."

"Friday, then, Felicia——" His voice was desperate with entreaty.

"All right, Roger, Friday." She must manage Friday, she must. She bit her lip.

"The Rose Bush at four, same table. I don't know how I'm going to wait, Felicia."

"Neither do I, Roger."

"I'll write, Felicia. I know your address now! I didn't

know, darling, when I met you on the road that day, it was outside your father's grounds——"

I didn't want you to know, she longed to tell him ; I wanted for the first time in my life to be accepted as myself instead of as daddy's only daughter. I thought you such a little thing, he was thinking, all by yourself, who'd never had any fun.

"I won't say good-bye!" she trilled over the telephone.

"Don't you dare!" he threatened gaily. "Until Friday, then—The Rose Bush at four."

"The Rose Bush at four," she agreed, wondering how she was ever going to "make" it, as make it she must.

"I love you," he said. That was always what it came down to—those three words that said so much, held such worlds of feeling, that trapped in their flat sounding prose every love poem that had ever been written.

She heard them still thrilling in her ears long after she had put down the receiver. They accompanied her all day as she drove her father into Glasgow, to the docks, to the works—all over the place in fact, until she drove him home in the evening. She had never done such a full day's work for him in her life, and as she started the ticking windscreen buffer on their journey home, she knew why. Her father knew that when she was with him, she could not be with the man he so heartily disliked. Her heart gave an ominous dunt as she thought about Friday.

Next day she drove her father to his office in Glasgow—she looked at the fine mass of building and thought gently of it because Roger had been there—and later in the afternoon drove him to Central Station to meet his sister and niece.

Aunt Daisy was more of a Saunders than Sir Miles himself. Strongly characterised good looks that made Felicia's father handsome and striking were slightly formidable when presented in female form, for there was nothing like her shy humble namesake about Aunt Daisy. She was massive, but her massiveness, like everything else about her, was firmly controlled. With a mania for organising everything and everyone, few felt within her radius that they could call their souls their own. She looked upon her friends and relations rather as she looked upon the ingredients of a pudding—excellent in themselves, but of no use to her until she had flavoured them to her liking and turned them out in her

mould. She had no vanities except her capabilities and her capabilities were immense. There were no half measures with Aunt Daisy : you either liked her, or you didn't. Felicia fortunately liked her, although she had never in the past seen enough of her aunt to feel she had an overdose of her. What most people felt within a very short period.

"Well, my dear," she greeted her brother affectionately kissing him on both cheeks. "And Felicia—lovely as ever." She always said exactly what was in her mind, so that if Felicia had been nondescript, Aunt Daisy would have greeted her with "plain as ever" and not been a whit put out.

"Where *are* you, Rosemary? I never knew anyone who could lose themselves in so short a period—here this moment, gone the next, like the hymn——"

"Hallo, uncle," Rosemary laughingly kissed him, "fun to see you, Felicia. Say, uncle, prepare for a shock when you see our luggage—I think you'll think we've come for the duration."

Why should these words fill Felicia suddenly with foreboding?

"It's a Saunders characteristic that, my dear Rosemary," he joked with her. "Were you never told that your mother and I didn't come into this world in a cabbage—we arrived in a panttechnicon!"

Most travellers descending from the southern train had difficulty in finding one porter for their luggage, but Sir Miles managed to procure two to deal with their visitors' pigskin suitcases and rawhide hat boxes while he genially led them across the station to his waiting car. He got into the back beside his sister while Rosemary banged herself into the front beside Felicia. Although first cousins, they had not met often in the past and had never known each other intimately. Rosemary was some two years younger than Felicia, of a larger build, with a walk that swung and dark as her cousin was fair. With her bright colouring, she looked anything but "out of sorts." In fact she looked blooming. There was an infectious gaiety about her, a bounding quality. She had the dark good looks of her mother but toned down considerably by the less definite if prettier characteristics of the "other side of the house." Felicia could never remember meeting Rosemary's father, her Uncle Jack, but she knew he wasn't dead. He and Aunt Daisy just didn't "live together" any more, no scandal of a divorce,

just a separation and no ill will on either side. Incompatibility was the word that would be used now. It must be admitted that most people's sympathies were with Rosemary's father.

"What are you doing for the war?" Rosemary demanded of her cousin.

"I drive daddy," answered Felicia, feeling it certainly didn't sound very much.

"Do you?" said Rosemary, full of interest. "Yes, I expect this war would about stop if anything happened to Uncle Miles! You'll never guess what I'm going in for? The land! I've had a full month of intensive training, have got my uniform and am just waiting to be sent to a farm, but there's a waiting-list as long as your leg——"

"Here are our things," boomed Aunt Daisy from the back. "Now, Rosemary, see if they are all there. Was it thirteen of everything including the rugs or thirteen *and* the rugs?"

Felicia drove the long car out of the crowded, dimly lit station and left the sprawling city streets as soon as she could. Green fields and trees, not yet quite in full leaf, took the place of tenement and square, mountains, blue with distance, bounded the horizon. "Every time I return to Scotland," Felicia heard her aunt say, "I wonder why on earth I put up with England!" "Here we are," said her father, as she drew up at the gates leading to her home, and he sprang out of the car. "Welcome to Newstones, my dear."

Felicia showed her aunt to her room, the most spacious "best" bedroom in the house, with a beautiful view overlooking the green policies of Newstones. "You're making me so comfortable, my dear," her aunt informed her, "I won't want to go." "Come and I'll show you yours," Felicia said to Rosemary, and like two schoolgirls they flew down the corridor. "I don't care what stall I have," Rosemary informed her, "but nice if it's near you." "It's next door," said Felicia and she opened the door of what was called the "blue room."

"This is a bit of old all right," remarked Rosemary, seeing how far she could bounce as she seated herself on the bed. She flung her expensive beret on a chair and faced her cousin. "We can talk in here," she said. "Say, what's all the hurry for?"

"Hurry?" questioned Felicia. "What hurry?"

"Mother informed me on Monday—late afternoon—that she and I were to travel north on Wednesday to visit my uncle Miles and my cousin Felicia. When I said, Why? she said the change would do me good! Of course, I'm awfully glad I'm here, Felicia, but do I look as though I needed a change? Now what's up? Or rather, what's behind it! Why are we here?"

"Oh," said Felicia, sitting down rather suddenly beside her cousin, "oh."

Her aunt hadn't got in touch with her father about coming north. Her father had got in touch with Aunt Daisy, asked her to come—at once. Why? Felicia's mouth began to get dryer and dryer, her heart to bump more uncomfortably as she thought of it. Of course she knew why. That Aunt Daisy might do everything in her vigorous power to put a stop to "this nonsense"—what her father called the love binding her to Roger and Roger to her.

"Come on, buddy," Rosemary encouraged her, her bright eyes sparkling, "don't hold out on a fellow! Let me in on it!" She put her hand on her cousin's knee. "I'll bet my last dollar there's a man in it!" she said.

"Yes," Felicia replied huskily, "there is. Someone daddy doesn't like."

"And you do. Tell me what he's like, Felicia." She wrinkled up her short little nose, an endearing habit the nicest puppies have. "Clark Gable type or Gary Cooper?"

"Oh, Gary Cooper I should say," returned Felicia, thinking Roger and the film star at least had height in common, "but—he's really like no one but himself, Rosemary. He's wonderful. No one will ever come in between us—ever."

"I should say not," Rosemary said bracingly. "I think parents are awfully nice, Felicia, I'm not complaining about them in any way, but they do like fingers in all your pies, don't they? The injustices that are committed for your own good! I always feel like saying my good will look after itself! How did you meet him, Felicia?" She nudged her cousin confidently.

"Oh, it was wonderful, Rosemary." The miracle of it all shone on Felicia's face. "You'll never guess where and how! Just outside the gates. His army vehicle had broken down and he was underneath it——"

"No?" gasped Rosemary. "How wonderful, Felicia," and she sighed enviously.

"He comes from a brilliant family," Felicia said proudly. "His mother writes books."

"No?" said Rosemary. "Oh, Felicia, how romantic it all is."

"Rosemary," Felicia said desperately, "I see why you've been brought north—it's for Aunt Daisy to keep an eye on me. So that we—Roger and I—can't meet. I know it is," she said urgently. "Daddy's got every minute of to-morrow mapped out for us, where I'm to take you, what we're to do. I love having you both, Rosemary, don't think I don't—only you see what it's going to be like——"

"You're telling me," drawled Rosemary.

"I promised to meet Roger on Friday at four. We've never been so long meeting before. Rosemary, would you come with me? We could manage together, where I could never get away by myself."

"Say, buddy, of course I will," Rosemary said gaily, giving her a squeeze of a hug to put her heart at rest. "It will just be tops meeting your beau. Where do you meet usually?"

"Always at the same place," Felicia said gravely. "At the Rose and Bush."

"That a pub?" enquired Rosemary.

"Of course not," Felicia said, scandalised at the suggestion, "it's a teashop."

"I forgot there wasn't 'that kind of pub' in Scotland that there is in England," replied Rosemary, the unshockable. "You know where a man can take a girl and have a game of darts if they like. And where does The Rose Bush hang out? Don't tell me it's in Glasgow?——"

"No," dimpled Felicia, "it's at Raldon—just a three-penny bit in the bus."

"You leave it to me," Rosemary advised her, "we'll be at Raldon at four on Friday over my live body!"

And they were. As Felicia advanced towards Roger across the polished floor, she forgot Rosemary behind her, the crowds in the crowded restaurant, where they were, what had led up to this moment—everything in the whole wide world except that her lover was waiting for her, that the next minute her hand would be in his. Because it had been so long since they last had met, because he couldn't help himself, he kissed her.

At last they drew apart. Felicia heard the chink of teaspoon against saucer, the buzz of chatter, became aware that although their love made an island round them, the sea lapped at their island.

"Oh, Roger," she said, "this is my cousin Rosemary. I do want you to meet."

Roger was too nice to let his face fall. He shook hands with Rosemary and found another chair for himself, while the three of them sat down at the table that was meant for two.

"Felicia couldn't get away unless I came, so you'll have to put up with me!" Rosemary, who never made any bones about anything, told him brightly.

"I think I'll rally!" he replied, wagging his head at her.

He liked her at once, Felicia could see that, and Rosemary "took to" him. Before three minutes were over, all three were leaning over the small table, like conspirators.

"Lily never got my telegram!" he told them. "She's made enquiries and evidently it turned up but no one thought of her. A Mr. Lily had something to do with the bakery side of this business in the dim ages and everyone thought it was for him. You'll never guess how I had to address the telegram?" he said to Rosemary. "Lily, The Rose Bush!"

They were all at one in thinking that excruciatingly funny. When their mirth had subsided, he said anxiously to Felicia,

"What about Sunday, Felicia? Mother's so longing to meet you. I said we'd be unless she heard to the contrary. What about it? I could manage the afternoon, but can you get away?"

"Oh, you must, Felicia," Rosemary, their staunchest ally, said earnestly, "really you must. There's three of us so surely one good idea should sprout between the three."

"Unless I just say out where I'm going," Felicia said stoutly, "I'd rather, much rather. But then," her hand was at her cheek, "I know what dad would say. That I'm being inconsiderate to our guests."

"Yes," agreed Rosemary, "and he'll be able to say that until we go. To be quite frank with you, Roger," they had been Rosemary and Roger from the very moment they met, "we're here for a very long time. So if you wait, Felicia, to see Roger's mother until after we go, you'll wait some time——"

"I did so want you to meet her soon," Roger was saying

very quietly, "before—I mean we might be sent to a different part of the country any day now."

Again the cold dread fingers of fear pinched Felicia's heart. "Any day now," he might tell her, "we're going abroad, Felicia—we don't know where we're going, we just know we're going." She sickened where she sat.

"Supposing," came Rosemary's decided voice, "supposing we just say we want to take a bus run through to Glasgow on Sunday. You can drop me en route——"

"As though we'd dream of that," Felicia and Roger said in unison. "You must come too," Roger assured her, "it would be such fun to have you. I think you're the sportiest thing." "Oh, Rosemary," breathed Felicia, "that would be wonderful of you. We'll never forget what you've done for us." "You bet we won't," confirmed Roger.

Rosemary remembered some pressing shopping she really must do before she and Felicia returned to Newstones. She arranged to meet Felicia at the bus stance in the square and swung gaily out of the restaurant. And Felicia looked across the table for two into Roger's brown eyes.

"Darling," he said, and held out his hand.

"Darling," she whispered back and put hers into his.

"In sickness and in health," he vowed. "For ever and ever, Felicia!"

"Not even death can part us," she plighted, the smile upon her face sweetly unsteady with tears.

He bent his head to kiss her hand.

He met them on Sunday where the country road, known locally as Plover's Road, branched into the main thoroughfare. Never did three happier, more excited, gayer people start out on an expedition together. They caught the Glasgow bus at Raldon, in the square. Roger nudged Felicia when it joltingly started and they laughed to think they were going together now in the opposite direction, instead of him saying good-bye to her!

They caught another bus in Glasgow for Princes Park, the suburb where Roger lived. This was quite a different Glasgow from the one Felicia saw when she drove her father to his office. Then it seemed an ugly forbidding city, from which she was always glad to escape to the greenness of the countryside around her home. Now somehow, in Roger's company, there was something friendly, welcoming, about

its greyness: it was Roger's home town. "I come from Glasgow," he would say if he were asked.

Once they alighted at their destination, Rosemary kept expecting Roger to say, "That's home over there," or "Here we are," as they passed some fine residential houses that had been built well out of reach of the city's smoke before there was a tram service. But Roger didn't say anything of the kind. He had felt Felicia suddenly cling to his arm, a gesture that brought out all that was masculine and protective in him, and knew she was beginning to get what could either be described as "stage fright" or "cold feet."

They were no longer walking down the red gravel walk, with its semi-private appearance, but along an ordinary suburban road with small semi-detached villas on each side. Roger stopped at once and said, "Here we are—here's home."

To Rosemary, coming from Newstones and accustomed to the large house that was her own home, it was as small as a rabbit hutch, shabby into the bargain. Yet with all its makeshift air, she could see this house was a home as the magnificent, substantial Newstones had never been. Roger never dreamed of apologising for it: he took it for granted, this house that wore its shabbiness and lack of paint with a reckless bravado, almost with a kind of charm.

"Do you like it?" he said to Felicia, hugging her arm.

"No," she said, "I don't like it, Roger—I love it."

"I knew you would," he exclaimed triumphantly.

He held open the gate for them and when its uncoiled hinges gave out a ghastly screech, remarked, "I really must mend this gate one of these days! Not much of an advertisement for the house of an engineer, is it?"

They had been watched for from an upstairs window, as the best look-out, and when Roger opened the door, the narrow hall seemed full of children who had tumbled down the stairs to be the first to greet him. But suddenly overcome with shyness because of the "visitors," they held themselves back. It was then their mother appeared.

She held out both her hands to Rosemary, to draw her to her and kiss her.

"My dear," she said, "Roger has told me about you, and I am so happy to welcome you to his home."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I SAY," said Rosemary, who took obstacles as she took her fences—in flying style—"it's terribly nice of you thinking it's me. But wait till you see my cousin!"

Mrs. Munro had not noticed Roger was accompanied by two visitors. Everyone laughed, and to Felicia it sounded as though water were coming out of a lot of carafes, all different sizes! Shyly she went forward and Roger's mother took her in her arms.

Her gaze travelled over the prettiness of the girl her eldest son loved. She was glad it was "this one," although she found Rosemary attractive enough in her robust way. But not for Roger, she thought intuitively. There was too much of the school-girl about her ever to attract Roger as this other girl attracted him with her fragile loveliness and air of "other worldliness."

"And this is Prue," Roger was saying, "and Jill, Denys and Tim. This is Felicia, folks—remember I told you about her!—and her cousin Rosemary."

Felicia saw them looking back at her with Roger's eyes—his brothers and sisters. What attractive children too, the boys good-looking, the girls pretty as daisies, but all highly-strung as fiddles, bright-eyed and twittering with an excitement that never seemed to subside, like small over-wound clocks chiming the hour every minute.

"How do you do?" said Prue.

"Hallo," said Jill.

"Very glad to meet you," Denys assured her.

Tim shook hands but reserved his opinion until closer acquaintance.

"There's a lovely tea for us all," thrilled Jill. "Wait till you see it!" she said encouragingly to their visitors.

"Felicia and Rosemary must go upstairs first and take off their things," their mother said laughingly. "They've had a long bus ride, you know." She had noted what perhaps only a woman's eyes would note, the expensive simplicity of Felicia's clothes, her well-cut shoes, the perfect taste of the "clip" on her fine woollen jumper. "Prue wants to take you up to her room, don't you, Prue."

"Yes," Prue said shyly. "I'll go first to show you the way," and she dashed up the narrow stairs as though there wasn't a minute to spare.

"I'm coming too," cried Jill, for all the Munros were sociable, "Wait on me," she said. Every Scotticism there was to use was in the bag Jill choose her vocabulary from.

"Of course we'll wait for you, Jill," Felicia smiled down at her, giving her her hand, as Rosemary dashed upstairs after Prue.

Such a sweet little room, above the front door, so that it faced the front garden, as Prue showed them, pulling aside the net curtains to let them see everything. Roger had made the window seat for her, and she patted it with her hand, covered it and everything, so that she could sit here and read when she liked. Prue was a great reader, Felicia knew, because Roger had told her: she would wash her hands and comb her hair and read for hours. Jill took Rosemary downstairs to see the lovely tea, and Felicia smiled across the shabby little room to his sister.

"I've wanted to meet you so much, Prue," she said. "I've wanted to meet you all but you specially. For you're Roger's 'one,' aren't you?"

"He thinks I don't know!" said Prue and they laughed to one another at the little men really knew.

"Roger, dear," said his mother the moment the girls had gone upstairs, "she's lovely. Oh, my boy, you're very lucky. Thank you so much for seeing to that business for me. Mr. Marshall says he'll try to sell the property, but that he's afraid he won't succeed in these times. I nearly told him that was exactly why he had never sold it before because he was afraid he couldn't, but of course I didn't. Roger, wasn't it extraordinary Sir Miles Saunders turning out to be Felicia's father?"

"Mother, wasn't it? It was like a nightmare. I always thought somehow Felicia's people were poorly off because she had never been to any of the places we'd been to! Her father's rolling, lousy with money, Mother. Of course he doesn't want me to have anything to do with Felicia." He swallowed rather painfully. "I suppose," he said, "that's only natural."

"I suppose it is, Roger," she agreed, trying to forget it was her son who was hurt, trying her best to be fair, unprejudiced. "I suppose it is, my dear. But of course nothing matters except you and Felicia. If because you are poor

makes no difference to her love for you—and after all she must have known that from the very beginning, mustn't she? "

"Yes," said Roger, and a smile began to light his face as he thought of unwinding himself from under the lorry on that day of days, "I don't think I give out a very wealthy impression even at the best of times!"

"My dear," said his mother, kissing him involuntarily, "I'm so glad you don't."

She was a tall woman, almost as tall as the tall son she was kissing. Felicia could see she had obviously taken no trouble with herself, but despite that she looked charming, pretty, inconsequential as the untended flowers growing so riotously all over the place in her front garden.

Felicia was so happy sitting at the table with Roger's family that she felt almost dizzy. His family—this sweet woman and these darling children, his brothers and sisters. She felt one of them already, as though she belonged here. They made her feel like that. She felt Roger's hand feel for hers under the table, and suddenly she knew how much he meant to this family, the eldest son, their "big brother," the only one of them "out in the world," the stir it made when he came home to see them! Her mind gave a little gasp as she thought what it would mean to them all when he got what he called his "marching orders," sailed perhaps overseas.

The youngest Munro was watching Felicia over the top of his outsize in mugs. A chatter was going on all round him but he suddenly announced clearly through it:

"I didn't like your father!"

"Tim, stop being rude," Jill, "the next to him" in age, said severely.

"I'm not being rude," said Tim, putting down his mug, "I'm just being truthful."

"It comes to the same thing," Denys sat upon him.

"But I'm liking you," Tim informed Felicia impartially.

She smiled across the table to him, yet she felt a little worried. Her father had been in this house then, unless Mrs. Munro had taken Tim to his office, which was unlikely. What was "the business" Roger had gone to see him about before he knew Sir Miles Saunders was her father? And why didn't Tim like him? He was usually so good with children, "went over big" with them.

But the present was too happy to be flawed by such tentative thoughts. Some of the shine of the grace Mrs. Munro had said when they sat down seemed still to be dancing upon the table. Grace was not said at Newstones. The children were so sweet, manfully avoiding themselves the plates where rations limited supplies and pressing the goodies upon their guests.

"Mother," she heard Roger protest beside her, "you're surely letting your down-and-outs drop now. If they can't get work during a war, they can't want it!"

"No, dear, of course I'm not dropping one of them," Mrs. Munro replied with happy determination. "And you're not to call them down-and-outs any longer. It's a horrid name, like chains, keeping them down and out for always. They're to be called the ins-and-ups after this."

"I don't think that's a good name at all," Denys informed her squarely. "I think people'll make a fool of it."

"Pushers and Pullers would be a better name for your down-and-outs, Mother, I think," remarked Prue.

"You see," Mrs. Munro explained to their visitors in case they were at sea in this conversation, which Rosemary certainly was, "we believe in running our lives according to the laws set down in the Bible. It's not what we take out of life that is important, it's what we put back, for everything that comes to us comes from the One Source. Although it may come in the form of wages or cheques for a story or what not, we know it all comes from the One Source which is as inexhaustible as the sea and will never fail one. Therefore, out of gratitude for what we draw from the One Source, or Substance, we return a tenth of all we take as a thank offering."

"Wouldn't it be nice," said Jill, "if some day somebody else's tenth came to us instead of our tenth always going to someone elses—if you know what I mean."

Everyone knew only too well what she meant, and everyone looked disapproving as though they wished they didn't.

"Now what about you all taking Rosemary to see the back garden?" suggested their mother. "Felicia and I will wait for you to come back. I'd like to see her alone—even without Roger!" which everyone, as they slid from their chairs, thought a great joke.

"My dear," Mrs. Munro turned to Felicia once they were alone together, "I want you to know how very lucky Roger is." She was smiling gently to her. "I've always been led

to believe that one's sons choose the last girl their mother would want them to marry! But Roger and you show how silly all these facile maxims are. If mothers-in-law get the daughters-in-law they deserve, as I think they do, then, looking at you, I feel there must be something extra special about me!"

"That something extra special you've passed on to Roger," Felicia said earnestly. "Oh, Mrs. Munro, he is wonderful, isn't he?"

"Yes, dear," the mother answered, "he is, and it's not just because he is my son that I am able to say that. You're very lucky too. Roger's one of the best. I've been able to depend on him ever since his father died, and he was only a boy in his teens when that happened. Married to him, my dear, you'll find there's a steady hand on the helm through fair weather and foul. And when you get to my age," her face was somehow wet although it was still smiling, "you find that is the most important thing in the world—not the weather, my dear, but the person you've come through it with."

"I know," Felicia said humbly. "I know what you mean," and she kissed her to show how well she knew although she couldn't put it into words. But she found herself thinking of the partings Roger's mother had had to make in her life. That first parting, when her eldest child was still a baby, and she kissed her husband good-bye and wished him God-speed, that first parting that lasted for years until he came back as he had gone—without work. As a commercial traveller, there would be partings every week, until that sudden savage last one of all, when she would feel his hand loosen on hers.

As for Mrs. Munro, her first apprehensions lest Felicia would not make a good poor man's wife were allayed. It was obvious that the girl before her had never known what it was to have to make two ends meet, but the mother could sense an integrity through the girl's charm and sensitiveness that told her Felicia would not only see the two ends met but would tie a bow to hide the join!

So much happiness and so soon they were all standing in the hall, saying good-bye. Roger was joking to make everyone feel better. "She's never forgiven me for growing taller than her," he said to Felicia, as he kissed his mother, "have you now?" The children all said they would give them a

"Highland convoy" which meant accompany them part of the way. "You really must turn now," Roger protested when they reached the end of the red gravel walk, "or it'll be getting dark soon and we'll have to go back with you!" Felicia felt their flushed little faces lifted to hers to be kissed. "Good-bye, Felicia," "Come back soon," "I love you very much."

"Well," said Rosemary, subsiding into a seat in the bus, "if that wasn't the swellest afternoon, I wonder what is!"

As for Felicia, she leant against Roger, and felt his arm around her. She felt tired with excitement, brimming over with happiness and contentment.

"Oh, Roger," she whispered, like a child saying her prayers, "I love them all. I knew they would be dear and special, because they belonged to you, but I never dreamt they would be such darlings. Your mother specially, Roger. I love her so. And Prue. She's my favourite too, and yet Jill—I can't really say. Jill's got your eyes, Roger. And Denys,—there's something so manly about him, isn't there? If I hadn't met you first, Roger, I think I would have waited for Denys! And darling Tim—I really think he's about the wisest person I've ever met!" A slight shadow crossed her face, which he didn't see for her head leant against his heart. "Roger," she asked suddenly, "where did Tim see my father?"

"At home," Roger replied uneasily.

Her father then had been inside Ornum. Felicia moistened her lips. Well she knew how it would strike him: he would not see the dearness of everything, only the shabbiness. That was what had made him so angry when he had heard the name of the man she loved. Because he knew Roger could not be well off, that his people weren't what he would call well established people, that he lived in what he would describe as a "pokey villa." And here was another reason why her father had been so upset when she told him about Roger. He was not Jules Trevere; Felicia realised now that her father had made up his mind she was to marry one person and one person alone. That was Jules Trevere.

"What was the business your mother was doing with him?" she asked Roger idly.

He stirred where he sat beside her. Felicia must never know that her father had more or less "done" his mother, rather more than less although it was all squared up now.

'Mother has a bit of property in a place called Sharon Lane,' he said. 'Your father had his eye on it—that's all.'

She was perfectly satisfied and he felt her snuggle happily against his side.

'I've so much to be grateful to you for, Roger,' she whispered drowsily. 'First of all you gave me the happiest birthday of my life, and now the loveliest Sunday of all the hundreds I've ever spent.'

He held her close to him in a sudden welling up of his love for her. This was how he wanted to have her always—beside him, safe at his side. His gaze suddenly fell on the khaki uniform he wore. She felt him hold her closer to him, heard within her ear the strong beating of his heart.

'Well, if it isn't Miles Saunders!' exclaimed red-tabbed General Fortescue as he strode to his car after inspecting the camp on the Scottish moor.

'And if it isn't Jinks Fortescue!' exclaimed Sir Miles.

To Fenwick, his secretary, his master sounded more surprised at meeting General Fortescue than the General sounded meeting him. As Sir Miles had told him to drive to the Royal Engineers' camp where General Fortescue was holding an inspection, Fenwick realised Sir Miles couldn't be so surprised as he sounded.

The two men were shaking hands with each other up to the elbow, clapping each other's arms, declaring if this wasn't the strangest coincidence, and recalling how long ago it was since last they had met.

'Where can I drop you now?' asked Sir Miles. 'I can't let you go after coming across you like this!'

'Let me drop you,' replied the General, making his way towards a car. 'We're going on to another camp at Scar-moor—is that any good for you? Excellent.' If he had said he was going to Land's End, Sir Miles would have concurred. The General turned to give orders to the officers accompanying him and they got into Sir Miles' limousine.

'Well, I never did,' he said as he leant back in the staff car and surveyed his friend. 'The years have given you weight and taken it from me, eh?'

'Well, well, Fortescue,' remarked Sir Miles, sighing gustily, 'which of us thought when we were in the fourth form that we'd live through two wars? A fine set of men

that you've been inspecting." His eyes narrowed until they seemed to see the cheap, brassy looking regimental brooch his daughter wore on the lapel of her model coat. "They've been here for a bit, haven't they? Must be fully trained by now."

"Yes, they are. I was just seeing them through their finished paces. Fine lot as you say."

"Not very likely they'll keep them in this country, is it?"

"Oh no. They're not expecting to be kept here. They're all dead nuts to get at Jerry. With air support and proper equipment, Saunders, I'd back one of our Tommies against five of their Jerries."

"So would I, I can tell you. They're getting the right equipment now, aren't they?"

"Yes, with men like you seeing they are."

Sir Miles leant forward to light the cigarette he had given him.

"I suppose these fellows you've just been inspecting," he remarked casually, "now they're trained and equipped, will be sent abroad whenever they leave here?"

"That's right," replied the General. "There's not a moment to spare, Saunders. You know that. That complacent British characteristic of taking it for granted time was on 'our side' all but lost us the war, you know."

They sat and chatted about old days and old friends, asked each other if they had seen anything of Tommy Rankine, wondered what became of Jim Struthers, until the staff car drew up at its destination, when Sir Miles changed into his own limousine.

"Where shall I drive you, sir?" asked Fenwick.

"Home," replied his Master.

He sat in the back of his car, staring straight before him, deep in thought. Things were working out very well, very well indeed. That fellow would be sent abroad with his regiment within a very short time and Felicia would discover her heart wasn't broken after all. Time mightn't be on Jinks Fortescue's side but it certainly was on Miles Saunders! He smiled where he sat.

"I'm going south to-morrow, Fenwick," he remarked.

"I'll want you with me—it's that Admiralty business. We'll leave by the ten o'clock to-morrow morning. You can drive me into Glasgow and save Miss Felicia."

"Yes, sir."

He could leave with an easy mind. And his mind would have been easier still if he had known how systematically his sister mapped out every minute of every day, to make it impossible for Felicia to arrange a meeting with the man with whom she imagined she was in love. Her brother had told Aunt Daisy he would shortly be moved out of the district. So luncheons, tea-parties, games of tennis, people "coming over" in the evening for a game of bridge, followed each other in what seemed to poor Felicia an unending procession. If she did fall heir to an odd hour or two, by that time it was too late to make any arrangement with Roger. He telephoned her when he could, and she sat in her bedroom and tried to make-believe miles weren't separating them, but a feeling of desperation took possession of her as the days passed at all the precious hours wasting by and she unable to see him. Letters, 'phone calls, weren't the same: no one could pretend they were the same. They were just second-best—that was all.

"I must see him, I must!" she thought frantically, as she sat in the sun-parlour one afternoon with her aunt and Rosemary when the Rennies and the Wentworths had taken their leave. With her father away, she and Rosemary could not now "go off on their own" as that appeared rude to her aunt, but she would tell her that she had an arrangement for the day after to-morrow. Nothing was arranged—so far—for the day after to-morrow. And before anything was, Felicia would tell Aunt Daisy she had an appointment. The Rose Bush at four! she thought, and her spirits rose on wings at the very thought.

"Mrs. Rennie has asked us all over for tea the day after to-morrow," remarked her aunt. "She wants us to see her garden."

Felicia took a long breath to state that she would be unable to accompany her and Rosemary to see Mrs. Rennie's garden, but at that moment Annie came in with a telegram on a tray for Aunt Daisy.

"Listen, Rosemary," she exclaimed, frowning as she read it, "it's from the Agricultural Board. They've found you a suitable farm and you're to go south immediately." She turned to Felicia. "That means we'll need to leave to-morrow at the very latest, my dear," she said.

"Do you believe that?" Rosemary demanded of Felicia as they sat that night, hugging their knees, for a last heart to heart talk before going to bed.

"Believe what?" asked Felicia, a little wonderingly.

"What Mrs. Munro believes," said Rosemary, biting with her good square teeth into a handsome slab of chocolate. "About it being important not what we take out of life but what we put in," she explained, her mouth full.

"Yes," said Felicia, a little surprised at the turn in the conversation, "I do, I'm sure of it. Aren't you?"

"Never thought of it before, I can't say," Rosemary said breezily. "But I've been thinking of it a bit since that Sunday. I see what she means, Felicia, and I'm not clever like you. Oh, yes, you are—you read books I just couldn't, and that's that. But I've been thinking, about me going on the land, you know—well, every nit-wit knows that the more you put into the soil, the more you'll get out of it, don't they? Well, that's what she means. And so as you can't just put in to get back with interest, make a speculation out of it, she talks about thankofferings. If that's what it says in the Bible, it can't be so sticky, can it? I mean I see what it's getting at, don't you?"

"Yes," smiled Felicia, "It's not what you get or make that matters, it's what happens to you when you're getting and making."

"You've said it," said Rosemary. She studied her toe nails below the hem of her thick silk nightgown. "Felicia," she remarked, "they're a lot of people in this world just taking, aren't there? Not putting much back, I mean?"

"I suppose so," Felicia said guardedly.

"I mean heading every subscription list with the biggest subscription isn't a thank offering," Rosemary was saying calmly. "It isn't, Felicia. You shouldn't get thanks or publicity for a thank offering, should you? I'm sure Mrs. Munro would say that was taking out, not putting in!"

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" Felicia said eagerly. "No wonder," she said gently, "Roger is like he is, having a mother like that."

"It was a grand afternoon and no mistake," agreed Rosemary. She looked up at her cousin and smiled. "Is it going to be The Rose Bush to-morrow at four?" she asked. "I bet it is!"

"Oh, Rosemary," exclaimed Felicia, hugging her, "you do understand."

"Anyway, Felicia," said Rosemary, and she put her warm

young hand on her cousin's knee, "I'm going to try to be like Mrs. Munro and put back more than I take out!"

Felicia saw her aunt and cousin off next morning, with their thirteen suitcases and hat-boxes. Newstones seemed very empty to return to somehow. Aunt Daisy filled every place she entered with her booming presence, and Felicia, who had always longed for a sister, knew she was going to miss Rosemary's companionship.

She had written to Roger the night before, telling him she was now free to meet him whenever he could meet her, so that it was no surprise when, that evening, Annie came in to tell her that was Mr. Roger Munro on the telephone.

"Oh, Roger," she said into the receiver, almost crying with happiness at hearing his voice. "It's been so long, hasn't it?"

"Long," she heard him say, "I can't tell you what it's felt like to me. Darling," his voice changed, "I've something to tell you. We get embarkation leave to-morrow. Seven days. Felicia, will you marry me before I sail?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT HAD come at last, what she had pushed to the back of her mind, pretended would never come to pass, couldn't happen. From the very back of her mind the dread formed itself into reality and she reeled to meet it.

He was going away. Not just from the district. Embarkation leave. He was going what fortune-tellers described as "across water."

Steady and clear as a bell, the bells that should have rung on their wedding-day, she replied:

"Roger, darling, you know I will."

If they were one, they could never be parted, no matter how high the mountains cleaving the distance between them, no matter how widely seas separated them. For now and forever—until death them did part—and after.

"Felicia, you will? Oh, my dear. Say that again. I couldn't leave you, Felicia, I couldn't—not unless we are married. That makes all the difference, doesn't it? You feel that too? Oh, Felicia, I might have known. I did know, you'd feel that too. Listen, darling: I'll see your father

straight away. Now, what do you advise—should I go through to Glasgow to-morrow and see him at his office, or come to Newstones? ”

“ Darling, you can’t do either,” she said. “ He’s south just now in London. I’ll wire his club and wire him at his London office, telling him—you’re——” in spite of herself, her voice faltered, “ going abroad and that we want to get married. Roger, what about your mother? ”

“ I’ll go through to Glasgow to-morrow and tell her. Felicia! ” A sudden thought struck him. “ What about you coming with me? ”

Why not? Her little face glowed and lit up at the other end of the telephone.

“ Oh, Roger, do you think so? That would be lovely. Where will we meet? Of course, The Rose Bush, but at ten! Lily will be surprised to see us then! Roger, you’ll wire your mother that we’re coming, won’t you? Darling, you think of everything. Yes, ’phoning would be much better! And I’ll put in my wire to daddy that I’m with you and to get in touch with me there.”

“ Felicia,” his voice throbbed with feeling over the wires, “ think of it: a week to-day and we’ll be married.”

“ Yes, darling,” she whispered, and her voice gave.

That was what she was going to think: a week to-day we’ll be married. Not a week to-day will be our last night together. She would be his wife then. She straightened herself at the other end of the telephone. His wife, Mrs. Roger Munro.

A soldier’s wife.

“ Oh, Felicia,” his voice sounded in her ear, “ won’t to-morrow be glorious? The Rose Bush at ten! Darling, just tell me once again before I ring off—you’ll marry me before I sail, won’t you? ”

“ I promise I will.”

As she put down the receiver, her face still glowed and shone, as though she still heard his voice lingering in her ears, “ I love you. Felicia, you know I love you so.” She sat there, motionless, her hand at her flushed cheek, just thinking of him, until she gave herself a little shake. To-morrow—The Rose Bush at ten. There was a lot to do before that.

Sitting at her escritoire, she began to write out copies of the telegram she was going to send her father. She would certainly send it Priority, but should she send it Greetings? A wedding telegram, she felt, should certainly be golden,

but not the telegram saying Roger was going abroad. Oh, when her father knew that, he would understand that she didn't just think she was in love with Roger, she knew it. As he would know it when he received her telegram. She would certainly send it Greetings, and it would stand out amongst his business wires in their plain official envelopes like a golden bird amongst a flock of sparrows.

It was a difficult telegram to compose, she had so much to say, but after covering some pages of notepaper with corrected copies, she wrote out clearly on a telegraph form :

"Darling Daddy, just heard Roger has seven days embarkation leave. Have promised to marry him before he sails. Please get in touch with me at his mother's house, Ornum, 17 Fir Road, Princes Park, Glasgow, to arrange about wedding. Telephone number South 1047. Lovingly, Felicia."

She hoped she had remembered everything. She kept the telegram beside her handbag that she could read it now and again as she moved about the room, just to see if she had remembered everything. Then she went to her wardrobe.

A knock came to the door. It was Annie, to see to the black-out, and turn down her bed for the night.

"Annie," said Felicia. "I'm going away to-morrow for a few days—to stay with friends in Glasgow."

"Yes, Miss Felicia."

"Mrs. Stimson won't be back yet?"

"No, Miss Felicia."

Felicia couldn't help it, she simply couldn't: if it hadn't been Annie, she wouldn't have done it, of course. But it being Annie made all the difference.

"Annie," she said, "I'm going to be married."

The maid, decorously turning back her young mistress's bed with practised hands, felt her mouth fall open with surprise.

"No, Miss Felicia? You don't say so! Oh, I never did. It—it's," diffidently Annie spoke not to appear presuming, "to the tall private, isn't it, Miss Felicia?"

Think of Annie knowing that! At that moment Felicia realised "down stairs" knew more about upstairs than upstairs ever dreamed.

"Yes, Annie."

"I'm so glad, Miss Felicia. Oh, I'm so glad. I can't tell you how glad I am."

"Nobody must know, Annie, until my father knows. I just had to tell you somehow. But you won't tell anyone, will you?"

"I swear I won't," Annie said loyally. "Oh, Miss Felicia, are you going to be a white bride?"

"Oh, no," laughed Felicia. "It's embarkation leave, you see, Annie." A quiver passed over her little face.

"I see, miss," said Annie. Funny, Felicia knew that Annie knew what that meant. "It'll have to be something you've got then, Miss Felicia, won't it?" They were no longer mistress and maid, but excited girls. "What about your blue two-piece—you haven't worn it, have you?"

"My blue two-piece?" Felicia asked wonderingly.

"Yes," said Annie, going over to the wardrobe and going into it as though she knew her way, "the one you keep to the back—in tissue paper," and she brought out something hanging on a silk coat-hanger in a flutter of tissue paper. "Miss Felicia," she said, solemn with the occasion, "if anything was ever made for a wedding, this is! That's what I thought when I saw it. That dress is fit for a wedding. I thought."

"Did you, Annie? Isn't that extraordinary. I got that before the war broke out and somehow," she took the dress and little jacket from the maid to look at them, "somehow I just didn't feel they were suitable to wear during a war. The colour's so delicate, isn't it, Annie?"

"Egg-shell blue," Annie informed her tersely. "That's what that is. Made for a wedding. It's been waiting in there all this time for the day, miss. Blue's a man's favourite colour, of course."

"Is it, Annie?"

"Always blue," Annie said out of her first-hand wisdom. "They pretend to like green but they're more superstitious than we are, miss, and they can't bear red and don't bother pretending, and they think you look a lady in black or navy. But blue's their colour, miss. And with your eyes, Miss Felicia— Oh, where's the wedding to be?"

"I don't know, Annie—not yet. Sir Miles will have the say there, but I would love it to be in church. Only, you see, the notice is so short."

"Get into your frock, Miss Felicia, do now—just to see that it's all right. Give me a tonic. Oh, I love weddings, don't you, Miss Felicia? My mother loves them so much

she always has a good cry at them! I feel like your bridesmaid—that's what I do! Oh, miss, it's perfect, isn't it? You haven't got any fatter, which is such a good thing. My mother simply couldn't wear at my cousin Agatha's wedding the dress she wore at my cousin Kate's! What a to-do we had even getting her into it, and when we heard the seams go, we had to get her out, and her laughing so and us all in stitches! Oh, Miss Felicia, and the hat to go with it. Just a bunch of flowers—that's what it is. He'll never forget you—never, miss—not as he saw you on your wedding day." Annie, true to her mother's tradition, suddenly gave a happy sniff.

"Do you think so, Annie?" Felicia asked, suddenly shy as she looked at herself in the cheval-glass. "Oh, Annie, what fun this is, I hadn't thought about my wedding-dress until you said. I've just heard, you see. And there's so much to think of and do. Annie, it's his people I'm going to stay with to-morrow—just until we hear when Sir Miles can come home. Oh, Annie, everything has come all at once, hasn't it?"

"That's how it always is, Miss Felicia!" Annie told her. "I've been going with Ted for two years now, and wearing his ring on my night off for one, but I know I'll just feel like you on my wedding night—as though everything had come all at once. You'll be taking your frock with you to-morrow, won't you, miss? Oh yes, you'd better. I do think so. Don't you let it out of your sight, and I'll pack it for you so that it won't crease. Oh, miss, what stuff. And stockings, and your shoes——"

With a spot of colour bright on each cheek, Annie ran along the corridor to reach "downstairs," her lips held gamely shut that not even a breath of Miss Felicia's secret would get abroad. While Felicia at last crept into bed and lay between the smooth, crisp sheets, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Of course, the thing was to take her frock with her. They would be married the moment her father could come north. It would save time then, when time was so precious, if they were married in Glasgow. Her father, Roger, might think that would be wiser. Naturally they would have liked to have the wedding in her own church, but this was a war wedding—her heart stumbled—and that meant one had a day or two to get married in, not as in the leisurely days of

peace when there were months of preparation ahead. Not that that mattered, not that anything in this wide world mattered except that she and Roger were going to be married.

Mrs. Stimson wanted to send for a taxi next morning to take the daughter of the house to the station on her Glasgow visit, but Felicia wouldn't hear of that. "We'll probably be going by bus," she explained, whereupon Mrs. Stimson was silent, thinking they must surely be queer friends who were travelling to Glasgow with Miss Felicia in a bus. War or no war, thought Mrs. Stimson, accustomed to see her master driven everywhere in one of his long low limousines. "There's your blouse case," she pointed out somewhat tartly. "I will not allow you to carry that, Miss Felicia. You know your father wouldn't like it." "But it's so light," Felicia said desperately, "really I can manage that, Stimmy. There must be something far wrong with me if I can't! After all, it's only the length of the avenue I'll have to carry it." "You'll do nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Stimson, who had forgotten about the avenue, "I'll send young Fox with you to carry it." Young Fox, the under-gardener, was the lame son of old Fox, the head gardener, and Felicia liked him very much, but she thought of a better idea. "No, not him," she said suddenly, "send Annie with me, Stimmy."

The two girls walked down the avenue together, danced perhaps would have been a better description, both were so excited. "You'll send a wire to the staff now, won't you, Miss Felicia?" said Annie, her pretty apron blowing in the light breeze, "just to let us know when it's going to be, although, mind you, I'll be thinking about you solid from now on. Blue for a boy, miss, they say!" she exclaimed rapturously, as the bus heading for Ralston drew up, "blue for a bride, say I!" She handed up Miss Felicia's blouse-case to the conductress and the next minute she and her young mistress had kissed. A moment later the bus swept round the corner, leaving her standing alone on the road-way.

Felicia leant against the high shaking cushioned back of the bus, her eyes shut. In her over excited state, the slight difficulties the housekeeper had made about the taxi had loomed out of all proportion, so that poor Felicia had wondered if she were going to have a struggle to leave at all. Now, safe in the bus, she felt curiously played out. Oh, Stimmy was

good and dear and kind, but Felicia suddenly realised how over protected, how wrapped in cotton wool she had been all her life. She thought of the small Munroes going from the south side of Glasgow right into the centre of the city by themselves to school. She thought of Roger, not yet ten, putting Prue on a donkey at Girvan before she was two! The picture of that sturdy small brown-legged boy and the independent little girl feeling for the rope reins, on the sands of their once-upon-a-time, made a tender loving smile play about Felicia's sweet mouth.

She had not wanted to telephone her telegram, thinking it much safer to send anything so precious through the post office. So before she entered The Rose Bush, she went into the post office next door to send off the two telegrams to her father, one to his London club, the other to his head office. The girl who accepted them across the broad counter glanced at the clock and jotted down for time of despatch 9.35.

She was a little early for her appointment, but Roger was there, waiting for her. The restaurant was less crowded than they had ever seen it, because of the early hour, but it could have been teeming with people for all they would have noticed. For as she crossed it to go to him, and he went to meet her, there were only two people in the whole wide world for them—each other.

They sat down at the table for two, still holding hands, her blue eyes looking into his brown ones, his brown ones looking deep into the blue depths of hers. Then their breaths caught on a long sigh, the sigh of complete happiness.

"Darling," he said, "you know what I've been thinking? This is our wedding breakfast! I always thought it silly having what they call a wedding breakfast after the ceremony, don't you? Everyone knows a breakfast should come first! So we'll do ours right, shall we?"

"Yes, won't we?" she said delightedly. "And nobody knows but you and me."

"The only two people who ought to know," he said quite severely. "You know, Felicia, I don't know whether you feel as I do—perhaps you don't—after all you're a girl and I know certain things mean more to a girl than they do to a man—but I think some weddings—these big peace time weddings for instance—are a great mistake," he drew his magnificently protracted sentence to a close at last. "What

I mean is," he began all over again, his nice brow furrowed as he tried to smooth a way through his thoughts, "don't you think—but perhaps you don't, darling—these weddings weren't for the bride and bridegroom, they were for the guests. I mean—his vows to her and hers to him—which is why there is a wedding after all—became so little important compared to how many sat down to lunch and how much champagne was drunk——"

"I know what you mean," Felicia whispered to him, "and I feel like you, Roger."

"Do you, Felicia?" he said eagerly. His hand tightened on hers. "That's why I'm not disappointed our wedding is going to be like this. It's what I want: just your people and mine, the people who really matter, and you and me, of course! There can't be much of a wedding without us, can there?" His brown eyes searched her face. "Felicia, you're not disappointed, are you? That there isn't going to be anything in the nature of a splash, I mean?"

"Oh Roger, darling," she said, "of course I'm not. It's what I want, what I would have chosen—just you and me, Roger, and your people and daddy." In her confiding way like a child, she drew her chair closer to the table to be nearer to him. "Oh, Roger," she said, "it's so much more romantic, isn't it, just like this. You and me. I won't miss the confetti or the five-tiered wedding cake or the 'splash' one bit. These aren't essentials, Roger, and a wedding should be made up of essentials from beginning to end, shouldn't it, or it isn't a proper wedding, not a right wedding, Roger, as ours is going to be. If you know what I mean."

He knew what she meant.

"I phoned mother last night and told her about my leave," he told her, "I said I was bringing you through with me this morning, and you'd be staying the night. I didn't say anything about the wedding, Felicia, I thought we'd ask her about it together."

"Yes," she bowed to him. "And, Roger, I wired dad—at both his club and his London office, so that he's sure to get one or the other, probably both! I gave him your telephone number so that he can get in touch with us straight away."

Sir Miles Saunder's bulky form could be seen through the glass screens of his London club telephone-box, that

smelt of leather and string and appeared just two sizes too small for him.

"Hallo, Daisy," he was greeting his sister buoyantly over the wires. "You got back all right yesterday? Yes—thanks—I got your wire. And how's Rosemary? Looking forward to being a land-girl at first-hand?" And he thought, Thank heaven I've no anxiety about Felicia being "taken": she's safe driving me. "Oh! Good heavens—off to-day? You will be feeling a bit down. Listen, Daisy, I thought of coming to see you on my way north. To-day. What's that? Not at all, my dear. You were good enough to help me out with Felicia when I was in a tight corner: surely it's a small thing to do in return. Nice to be off the chain even for a day or two—haven't had a break, you know, since before the war. For the first time in my life, Daisy, I'm beginning to feel my years! What's that? Nonsense, no one would ever know to look at us I was younger by two years! The Admiralty business that brought me south has gone better than I scheduled for, as a matter of fact: that's why I can scrape up a few days rest on my way north. Am just leaving now—will be with you for lunch. Twelve-twelve the train arrives. Good-bye until then."

He hung up the receiver and withdrew himself, smiling jovially, from the too small telephone-box. The club, the best in London, was so quiet that its new members were shocked into never raising their voices to a natural height in its forbidding halls and on its carpet muffled stairs. But Sir Miles was not a new member, and greeted his secretary with his customary gusto in the pillared vestibule.

"Morning, Fenwick. Got my ticket all right? No, I'll manage to the station myself." He cocked an eye at the clock, entombed in marble, and saw it was five to ten. "I want you to see to that Tarpaulin business for me. Don't leave it—or them—until you see the goods off the premises on the way to the Admiralty, and don't be put aside by any excuses jibbed up at the last moment. They've promised despatch on Saturday—see they keep it."

"Yes, sir."

"Have been to the office to see about my mail—nothing out of the way. Miss Low will attend to it. Page!" he called to a small liveried boy, "any telegrams or letters for me to-day? Enough to play nap with, eh?" he said genially, taking a pile from the salver offered him. "I'll drop you

on my way to the station," he said to the secretary, "anywhere leads to that god-forsaken hole that Tarpaulins has chosen to inconvenience everyone with!"

Together they passed down the club steps to the taxi ticking in wait for them. A whistling telegram boy came along the street on his bicycle, braking when he came to the club. As the taxi started forward, he drew from the black case on his belt a greetings telegram and, still whistling, went up the club stairs with it in his hand.

Inside the taxi Sir Miles was tearing open his correspondence and passing it to the secretary.

"Nothing you can't deal with there," he remarked. "Now, remember, Fenwick, take nothing from Tarpaulins but despatch on Saturday. If you see you're going to have trouble, threaten to get me to come down. That'll soon put the fear of death into 'em!" he said with satisfaction. "But don't you dare do anything so inconvenient to me! See to it yourself and stay on the spot if need be. You've got my address and telephone number? Yes. All right then. This is Wednesday. Remember I don't want to hear from you until I see you in Glasgow on Monday!"

In the first-class compartment, on the railway journey to his sister's, Sir Miles felt as he hadn't felt for years. Like a boy on holiday! he thought, his hand beating contentedly on the leather arm of his seat, his glance appraising the scenery flying greenly past.

Only now did he realise how hard he had been working lately, business stretching even into his few hours of relaxation at home. Well, someone had to do the job, and he knew without conceit few were fitter than he. That little bit extra, he thought, if everyone just gave that little bit extra, what a world it would be to live in! A world of geniuses instead of a world where the "smart" ones were trying to snatch someone else's little bit extra! He stretched himself luxuriously where he sat.

The comradeship, the companionship of it all, her blouse-case beside his kit bag on the luggage rack, in the shaky bus going to Glasgow shoulder to shoulder, or rather her small fair head resting on his strong square shoulder. Felicia could have wished that bus ride should go on for ever. It was driving them, of course, towards so much, their wedding-day for instance, but it was also driving them towards that

moment when Roger would take her in his arms to say good-bye. Her blue eyes widened, until she remembered just in time the vow she had made, that for the glorious seven days of Roger's leave she was going to think, not of their parting, but of their wedding.

As she walked down Fir Road with Roger, carrying both his kit bag and her suitcase, she thought she could pick out Ornum as the house in the whole road where "the lady who wrote books" was most likely to live, for although it needed "a lick of paint" more than most, there was something about it none of its neighbours had, something that could best be described as charm. Even when children's voices didn't sound in the garden, anyone could see from the look of it that it was used to children playing there, while you could tell from the house itself that inside it birthdays were never overlooked, however old or young you happened to be, Christmas went off with the merry bang of a cracker, and Hallowe'en always smelt of apples.

The children came rushing forward to greet them—no holding back now for Felicia was no longer a stranger to them, but one of them, Roger's girl.

"Darlings," she asked, kissing them happily, "has any telegram or telephone message arrived for me?" And when she heard no, she said to Roger, "Of course daddy's scarcely had time."

"Scarcely," he agreed.

Denys asked to carry Roger's gun, and Tim took his service respirator. "Really," said Roger, glad to be rid of them, "I feel as though I were undressing in the middle of the road!" The gate swung to brokenly behind them all, and he thought to himself, "I really must mend that gate one of these days!" One of these days! It would have to be now unless he wanted to wait until he came back, after the war was over! The front door was wide open—it usually was, and the children all screamed to the inhabitants at large, "Here's Roger and Felicia!" There was an inviting smell of cooking filling the interior, for the Munroes had their "big meal" in the middle of the day. Prue came out of the kitchen in an apron and his mother hurried from upstairs.

To the children their "big brother" was home on leave: that was glorious enough to be going on with, to fill the present with happiness and excitement. But Felicia sensed at once, through the quivering of her own heart-strings, that

both his mother and Prue realised what kind of leave this was.

"Listen, folks," said Roger, tossing his kit-bag to the children, "there's something in there for everyone of you. All labelled too, so there won't be any mistake! You can get down to it now if you like!" Laughingly he shut himself into the dining-room with Felicia, his mother and Prue. "Mother," he said, serious again, "what do you think about it? You see, Felicia and I want to be married before I sail."

She was sitting—as the years passed with their partings and greetings, she found she sat down now a great deal more than she used to do.

"Well, my dears," she said gently, looking from one to the other. "It's for you both to decide, isn't it? After all, you are both old enough and wise enough to make your own decisions. I can only say to you, Roger, and to you, Felicia," she was smiling to them both, "what I'd have done if I were in your case—I would certainly have got married before Roger sailed." She was no longer looking at them but at a darn on the faded green tablecloth. "You see," she said, "I married your father, Roger, during the last war. Everyone—my relations and his too—counselled us to wait until it was all over, but we didn't." She was looking directly at Felicia now. "My dear, I can tell you," she said, "I never regretted it. There hasn't been a night when I said my prayers that I haven't thanked God we married when we did."

The children rushed into the room, their own presents unwrapped and with their mother's and Prue's—that they could open them as soon as possible. Everyone was admiring what everyone else had got and hugging themselves with pleasure at their own present, while Prue took Felicia upstairs.

"You're to have my room," she said. "I hope I have remembered everything, but ask me if I haven't." A lace spread had been put on the bed since Felicia had last been in the room, and flowers from the garden were in a bowl on the bare little dressing-table. "I put them beside the mirror," explained Prue, "so that you can see them twice." A copy of *David Copperfield*, Prue's favourite book, was carefully laid out on the bedside table and an extra chair had been brought in from another room. She opened the wardrobe to show Felicia it was quite empty, "except for

Mother's winter coat which you won't notice," and all ready for "her things."

"Everything's lovely, Prue," Felicia said happily. "I've only brought a blouse-case. But, Prue, my wedding-dress is in it! Would you like——"

Prue was on her knees at the blouse-case before Felicia had finished her sentence. Never, she told Felicia, had she seen anything so lovely. She went to the door and called to her mother, Jill, Jennie, the fly away little daily, to come quick. Everyone came rushing upstairs but Prue wouldn't let Roger in. He mustn't see Felicia's wedding-dress until the day, otherwise it was bad luck. Everyone made Felicia get into the dress and the hat, and the shoes and the stockings, and called through the door to Roger how lovely she looked and what he was missing until he saw her in them! Jill ran away and came back with the coat-hanger, only Jill called it "the shoulders," the frock she wore at her prize-giving usually hung on and gave it to Felicia for her wedding-dress. They hid it safely away in the wardrobe where Roger couldn't possibly see it, and wouldn't even tell him its colour, although he was invited to guess if he liked, whereupon Roger went through the colours of the rainbow and tried to read from their faces which it was. But they all exploded with mirth at every colour he suggested and gave nothing away, until he exclaimed indignantly, "I think it's tartan! And if it is, that's not fair!"

Felicia could not go farther than the garden as any minute she expected her father to ring up, but they all had afternoon tea in the garden and she was so happy that she found her breath caught. When she heard from her father, she thought, her cup would be brimming over, and her heart sang with thankfulness at all the happiness that had been sent to her.

"Your father won't 'phone up till after seven," Denys remarked. "He'll get it cheaper then, you see. It's terribly expensive 'phoning all the way from London."

Roger made no reply. An expense for Sir Miles Saunders to telephone from London about his daughter's wedding! But he grew more and more silent as the hours passed and still there was no word from London. Not even that night, or the first thing next morning.

"I can't think what's happened," Felicia said unhappily as she sat in one of the striped deck-chairs in the back garden. "I simply can't." She pushed her fair hair from her brow.

"You'd think he'd be bound to get one or the other, Roger. At least to-day, if he were out of London yesterday. I know he went down to see about some business for the Admiralty. Unless he's on a ship or something," she finished hazily.

"No," Roger said firmly, "I don't think he's on a ship, Felicia."

He thought he saw through Sir Miles' "game." Felicia's father wasn't going to get in touch with them at all, believing that they would wait until he did when it would be too late for them to marry.

"We'll have to do something, won't we, if we don't hear to-day?" he said. "I mean," his nice chin squared, "this after all is my second day of leave. Two days out of seven gone, Felicia. The only thing I can think of doing, if we don't hear to-day, is for you and me to go to London to-morrow and see your father"

CHAPTER NINE

"YES," Felicia said faintly, "perhaps that would be the best thing to do—if we don't hear to-day, Roger, but I'm sure we'll hear. Oh, surely we'll hear."

Roger was anything but sure, so could not comfort her, however much he wished he could, particularly when he heard the anxiety in her voice and knew from it that she was wondering what he was wondering: if her father had any intention of getting in touch with them.

"I'll go up and see Mother about it," he remarked, kissing her because he had to leave her for a few minutes, "and see what she thinks."

He went into the house and into the dining-room, where his mother did her writing. That was why the drawing-room in Ornum had more of a lived-in look than most drawing-rooms, because the children used it to play in so that their mother could be undisturbed in the other public room. Undisturbed! Roger's lips were wry as he realised for the first time how little privacy his mother had to do her work in a house so small that the telephone ringing in one room could be heard in every other one.

"Mother," he said apologetically, "here am I doing the very thing I've put the fear of death in everyone else not to do!—disturbing you."

She turned where she sat at the untidy writing table in the window to smile to him.

"You couldn't disturb me, Roger," she assured him.

That was his mother's secret, he realised: Jennie rushing in to tell her the soup was singed, Denys calling downstairs the bathroom sink was choked, Jill running in from the garden to show her where she had hurt herself when she fell—yet no matter how pressed she was in her work, these were never interruptions. She never forgot a household was a home; hers must not be turned into an office although she did do her work there. The ordinary hum-drum life of every day was of more importance to her than the high-sounding what Jennie would call "goings on" she wrote about in her novels. She believed that jam now and again was every bit as important as the bread and butter they could not live without.

"It's about Felicia's father not getting in touch with her, isn't it?" she asked.

Roger put the portable typewriter, which was more off the table than on it, into a safer position, and cleared a corner for himself by removing the page proofs of his mother's latest novel which must be corrected that week.

"Yes," he said. "Mother, what do you think we should do?" His face hardened. "I'm quite convinced, of course, he's not getting in touch with us."

"No, dear. It looks as though he weren't, doesn't it? He'll hope that—when he does it'll be too late for you to marry. Oh, we mustn't blame him, Roger. Remember, Felicia means everything to him, his only one. He'll think he's acting for the best, for her best."

"Mebbe," remarked Roger, frowning, "though I notice when you act for other people's best, the only person you seem to benefit is yourself! Mother, you don't think we should let him pull this off, do you? I was saying to Felicia I thought we should go down to London to see him since he won't come up to Glasgow to us."

"Yes," she agreed, "I think that would be the best arrangement."

Roger, not looking at her, swung his leg.

"That means, of course, we'll be married in London," he said, savage at the thought that his mother, none of his people, would be able to be at their wedding—all because of "that man."

"Yes, dear, of course," she replied. "I understand that, Roger." She put her hand on his knee. "It's hard, dear, but it just can't be helped. You know how I'll be thinking of you so. Let me know the time you're going to be married—that's all I ask."

He knew she would spend the time on her knees, blessing them in her prayers. He wondered what he had ever done to deserve such a mother, such a wonderful person as Felicia, both of whom would stand by him through thick and thin, the hungers and the bursts.

"I thought," he said carefully, "of wiring the Lorents to ask them if they'd put us up to-morrow night."

"Yes, I would, dear. You'll go to-morrow, of course. By the ten o'clock? I must see you have sandwiches, for you get nothing on the train nowadays."

He felt better after he had wired his father's sister, who lived in Wimbledon. At last things were beginning to move. Two days of his seven days' leave gone—and to-morrow, the third, would be spent in travelling. His face darkened with anger as he thought of it.

He went into the little shed in the back garden, which was called variously the pram-house (although now, instead of a pram, it housed a second-hand lawn mower), the greenhouse, although its only claim to anything of a botanical nature was a few damp empty flower pots on the encrusted shelf, the tool-house or "Roger's workshop." Choosing with discrimination some tools out of an old knife-basket, he went into the garden and called to his family, "I'm away to mend the front gate." His family, he thought, striding down the garden path, and his brown eyes lightened, his family with Felicia in the very heart of it.

Of course they all came to help him, hold his tools and tell him how they thought he should set about it. He made a beautiful job of it, although perhaps they thought it who shouldn't. Jill swung it to and fro and said, "It's so right now it feels quite wrong, if you know what I mean!" Roger found some green paint everyone had forgotten about. They watched him lustfully as he began to touch up the gate where his tools had chipped off what little paint remained. He asked them if they thought he should just paint the whole gate and be done with it. They said yes to a man. He grew more and more ruminating as the paint began to run down and more and more gate seemed to appear that

hadn't been yet done. But he "made do" by only painting every second bar and it looked so nice, striped effect, after it was done everyone said it just looked as though it were done on purpose, if you know what Jill meant. Roger chalked "Wet Paint" on the pavement outside, and they all went in for tea, thinking Roger thought of everything.

"Roger! Felicia! Come quick!" Jill suddenly shrilled. "You'll never guess what's happening! A telegraph boy's coming down the road!"

Everyone flocked to the door. Could it be at long last that word had come from Felicia's father? Would the telegraph boy come to them? They must remember, they thought fearfully, that a new baby had just arrived at Number 19 to nice Mrs. Spence. It might be for her. They must be prepared for such an eventuality. But— Everyone prayed very hard and held their breaths as he neared, then let them out in an audible gasp as the boy stopped outside Ornum, gave the striped gate a good look—and come up the path.

Denys took the telegram from him.

"It's for Munro," he said, not looking at Felicia.

"Oh, Roger, quick," said Felicia, shutting her eyes.

Everyone else kept theirs wide open looking at Roger, to guess from his face the moment he knew himself if it were good news or bad. They saw his face distinctly fall.

"Felicia," he said unhappily, "I'm terribly sorry. It's not from your father. It's from Uncle Dick saying they'll be delighted to see us to-morrow and will meet train. I'm terribly sorry, darling," he whispered to her, taking her arm, for she looked so white he thought she was going to faint. "I should be shot for not thinking of that. Of course they'd wire in reply to mine."

"It's nobody's fault," she answered, slipping her hand into his and trying to smile to reassure him, but it was rather a sorry effort. Nobody looked at anyone else as the little group at the door broke up.

The house seemed full of visitors that day, coming at the funniest times, "just looked in as they were passing" kind of thing, although everyone knew from their guilty expressions they hadn't been passing at all. Felicia knew perfectly well it was Jill who had let the cat out of the bag, for she had found her in her bedroom showing a small friend, in the strictest confidence and sworn to the deadliest secrecy of course, what was now known in Ornum as "the wedding

dress." After that the visitors began to come in penny numbers and little bunches, people from next door, and over the way, and down the road. The dearness of it all. To be patted and tugged forward and introduced as "Roger's Felicia—they're getting married, you know—would you like to come upstairs and see the dress?" Everyone liked, of course, and the house fairly chimed with happy voices, exclamations of delight, congratulations and good wishes. Felicia's blue eyes were pricked with tears as she thought of not being able to be married amongst so much love, for now she had to face the fact that perhaps Roger was right. Her father wasn't going to get into touch with them. They would have to go to him.

After the breathless stir of day-time, the house seemed very quiet to Roger as he sat in the "wee small hours" by himself in the dining-room that night when everyone else had been packed off to bed. Even his mother, for he had promised to correct her proofs if she would go to bed earlier than she usually did. Well he knew she was accustomed to wait up until now, getting on with her writing, the only time the house was quiet. And as he heard the tick of the clock in the hall becoming louder and louder in the silence, and the stairs creak although no small feet were pattering upon them, he remembered again how he used to sit, his knuckles at his brow, reading up for examinations while he attended the Technical College. So much had happened since then, a whole lifetime instead of a few years to separate the man from the boy. Was it the war, or was it Felicia? Restlessly he rose and roamed about the room, his hands in his pockets. Three days out of his seven before he could call her his wife and she my husband. They might never have more than these seven days. His fine mouth straightened. Did her father not think of that? That massive impressive figure of a man loomed up again in Roger's memory, he saw again the look of cold distaste gleam from the other's eye. Felicia's father wouldn't bother thinking of that, of course, as long as he could stop their marriage.

Roger didn't trouble to go to bed that night, it didn't seem worth while when he knew he couldn't sleep. He had a cold bath in the early morning and shaved, listening to the house wakening up around him; milk bottles arriving, the dustmen making a noise like thunder off-stage with bin lids, his mother going downstairs, Prue setting the table for an

early breakfast, Jennie, the little daily, coming in with the newspapers "off the mat," telling his mother it was "a lovely day and no mistake."

"A lovely day, and no mistake"—what should have been their wedding day, now to be spent in travelling in a dusty train to London. He had thought, of course, they would be travelling in the opposite direction, him and Felicia, on their honeymoon.

He left early with Tim to stand in the queue for the London train. Tim, who wanted to be an engine driver, insisted on going with him. Denys and the rest of the family were entrusted to accompany Felicia to the station at a more reasonable time. It had to be third class, of course, Roger frowned unhappily as he stood near the top of the queue; he hoped Felicia would understand and because he knew she would felt reassured instead of discomfited. As it was, this unforeseen journey to London was making an alarming hole in the savings he had taken out of the bank which he meant to spend upon their honeymoon.

He "booked" two corner seats by leaving her blouse-case and his service respirator upon them, then, lighting a cigarette, strolled towards the barricade. He saw them before they saw him. His mother had brought flowers to give to Felicia, to make it all as much like a wedding as she could. His mother would think of that, he thought as he kissed her good-bye through the open window of the third-class compartment.

"Oh, Roger," Felicia sighed happily, removing her head at long last from the window, "what a darling family you've got. Isn't it lovely to think they'll soon be mine too!" She held his mother's flowers to her.

"You look like a bride," he whispered to her.

That was what she was of course, his bride. Really, it had been the stupidest thing to book two corner seats. Certainly he could look at her from his corner one, but to spend the hours and hours of the journey, she in her corner and he in his, bending forward unnaturally when they wanted to say the smallest thing to each other—it just didn't make sense. So he "swopped" his corner seat with the man next Felicia, a harmless looking individual who accepted the exchange with alacrity, and went to sleep almost at once, his hat over his eyes, thinking this was certainly his lucky day

And Roger put his arm round Felicia while she leant her slight weight against him.

"Darling," he said, "you are sweet—you've never 'let on' to me that this is the first time you've ever travelled third."

"I never even noticed!" she exclaimed, and he hugged her because he knew she never had.

They had Prue's sandwiches at twelve, and tea, which tasted so pleasantly of cork, out of the Munro's picnic thermos. Roger brought a slab of chocolate out of one pocket and a packet of biscuits from a canteen out of the other. Felicia thought it was the loveliest meal she had ever had.

"Uncle Dick'll probably meet us," he said when they were at the contented chocolate stage, to give Felicia the "low down" on the family she was meeting that day. "He married dad's eldest sister—she's a dear. You will like her, Felicia. And Uncle Dick too. You remember I told you all about their son, young Dick, who landed in Wales? They've another boy and two girls, but I wonder if any of them will be at home. Felicia," he moved restlessly where he sat, "when we arrive, I think the first thing we should do is go to your father's club, don't you?"

"Yes," she agreed, her heart beginning to beat rather fast.

The train was not more than half-an-hour late and Uncle Dick was there to meet them, a small man in a bowler hat, at the age when, if there had been no war, he would have begun to take things more easily. As it was, he now bore the harassed look of a man thinking of two things at a time but able to smile valiantly through it all. He greeted his nephew exuberantly, exclaimed what a surprise everything was, and remarked, when he saw Felicia, that he wasn't going to ask if he could kiss the bride. He was going to do it.

"Listen, Uncle Dick," said Roger, buttonholing him. "We've a great deal to tell you, but before we go home with you we want to go to Felicia's father's club. Can we get a taxi?"

They managed a taxi, after standing in a queue, and when Felicia said "Black's Club," to the driver, Uncle Dick's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "That's where all the big-wigs go, y'know," he said, "and that's all the address that's needed—even on letters from abroad, 'Black's, London.' They get there with just that on them. You won't

even be able to go into the vestibule," he remarked with gloomy pride to Felicia. "Women aren't permitted even on the threshold of Black's. Roger will have to bring your dad out to you."

But Roger could not do the impossible, bring out what wasn't there to be brought. Within a few minutes he was descending the unimposing steps of the most famous club in London and had slammed himself into the taxi beside Felicia and his uncle.

"He isn't there," he said, "hasn't been since the day before yesterday, but that means he's got your telegram, Felicia. They told me only to-day's telegrams were waiting for Sir Miles."

"Oh, Roger," cried Felicia.

"You see," Roger explained in a nutshell to Uncle Dick, "Felicia's father doesn't approve of me. We wired him we were going to get married before I sailed and he's never replied. That's why we came south. To see him. He's known, Felicia, that we might do that and he's just moved off somewhere else, where he can't be found."

"Well, well, well," said Uncle Dick, "that's very distressing. But you come home with me and see what your Aunt Susan says about it all. It's wonderful how different everything seems once you've had a good square meal. And your Aunt Susan is a cook and a half. No corners left, I always say, after her square meals!"

They could only take the taxi to the nearest tube station, because of the three-mile limit. Uncle Dick, a Londoner born and bred, leant out of it to show Felicia the air-raid damage. Most of it had been cleared away now, of course, and it gave her a curious feeling to see these unnatural wastes of spaces, like country space, where crowds had once jostled and buildings busy as hives had reared their many storeys.

"Yes," said Uncle Dick, his pleasant face glistening with heat in the taxi, "we took it, didn't we? Greater London—that's what it is to-day. Greater London, I always say."

Aunt Susan had been a red-haired woman and there was still something fiery about her although her hair was now white—the warmth of her kindly heart which was hospitable and welcoming as a lit hearth. The longer she lived in London the more Scotch she became, so that Felicia was greeted by a tongue which struck familiarly in her ears.

"Roger," she exclaimed to her nephew, "you've grown

another yard since I last saw you! Do you mind, at Crail, before the war? Laddie, you'll have to think about stopping soon, for we can't go raising our roofs for you! And this is your bride, Roger? Oh well, if she's as good as she's bonny, she'll do! Won't she, father?"

"Just what I was saying!" said Uncle Dick, his arm round his wife. "I said to her I said, 'I'm not going to ask if I can kiss the bride—I'm going to!'"

Aunt Susan showed Felicia to her room—Phyllis' room, she explained. Phyllis was now in the A.T.S., and Eileen, her younger daughter, in the W.A.A.F.S. "The competition between the two services when they meet," said their mother, "is enough to start a young war by itself!" Tom, her youngest boy, was in the Navy, and Dick—he hadn't even got embarkation leave. The first thing she knew that he was away, was a post card. "But I'm not going on talking," she said, her voice changing, "with two hungry men champing downstairs for their dinners! So just give your face a dyte, dear, and come down when you're ready."

The house probably cost a great deal more, being larger and more pretentious than Ornum, but although it was in better repair, it was jerry-built compared to the Scotch villa, built to withstand the more rigorous northern winters and storms. Felicia thought how lonely it must sometimes feel to the middle-aged couple, living from post to post in a home that had once stirred with the growing up of strenuous sons and daughters.

After Aunt Susan's square meal that certainly left no empty corners, they retired into what was called "the lounge" for coffee while Roger telephoned Felicia's father's office.

"It's the same story," he said, throwing himself into a chair when he returned. "The last time he was at the office was the day before yesterday—Wednesday. So he must have got your wire there too, Felicia."

"Well, well, well," said Uncle Dick, "now what do you say about it all, Aunt Susan? I say you can't go chasing someone much further when you don't know where to chase him, eh? Can't be done, that's what I say."

"Three days out of your seven, Roger," said Aunt Susan. "You've come down south to see this Sir Miles—Felicia's dad. You can't do more, my dears, can you?"

"No," said Roger, "we can't do more." He looked at

Felicia across the unfamiliar red-brick fireplace that had a screen before it Phyllis had worked. "We'll get in touch with the club and the office first thing in the morning," he said. "Felicia, if there's no word then, will you marry me to-morrow?"

The telephone bell disturbed the quietness of Aunt Daisy's household on Saturday morning. Davis, her aged servant, crossed the hall to answer it, his customary preoccupied expression on his wrinkled face.

"Hallo?" he said into the telephone. "Yes, this is 2039. Um? Sir Miles Saunders? Yes, Sir Miles is staying here at present. What's that? I'm afraid I can't do anything of the kind. Mrs. Parker and Sir Miles are both out golfing. No, I couldn't possibly get in touch with Sir Miles straight away. He is probably on his way back now. What's that? Phone the golf-house? Well, I could, but I don't see how that would catch him if he's on his way back now," complained Davis, who had not known enough of Sir Miles to become infected with something of his speed and despatch. "We expect them back between twelve and one. What's that? Who? You're Mr. Fenwick, Sir Miles' secretary? And I'm to tell Sir Miles immediately he returns he's to phone you at his London office. Most urgent. All right. Yes, of course I've got that." And Davis, who was nothing if not touchy, put down the receiver with some irritability.

Just as he thought, he said with querulous satisfaction to himself, when he telephoned the golf-club. Mrs. Parker and Sir Miles had just left. Some people didn't know how to take a telling.

"Well," Sir Miles remarked to his sister as they walked back from the golf-course through the wood, "that was my first round of golf since the war began. Nothing like it to keep you in condition. My heavens, Daisy, I'm beginning to blow! Will have to put a stop to that, y'know!"

"Didn't seem to interfere with your game at all," she remarked.

"Beginner's luck!" he laughed. "Had to hold on grimly just to even with you!" He looked at his sister with some penetration. Perhaps that was what had "gone wrong" with her married life: she had always done everything better than poor old Jack, who couldn't even feel superior on man's prerogative, the golf-course! She might have made a more

satisfactory wife if she hadn't been quite so fine a golfer. "Nothing to hurry back for, is there?" he asked, pausing at a gate. "Let's have a cigarette." He lit hers, then his own. "That's what I call life," he remarked, "nothing to hurry for!"

"Yes, Miles," she returned in her pointed way, "but if you had nothing to hurry for, you'd soon hurry for nothing, and you know it!"

"Probably," he agreed jovially, "but you don't know what these few days have meant to me—no letters or telegrams to remind me of business——"

"Just a brief look at the newspapers to see the market!" she said laughingly. "What would you do without that market, Miles! But I can't tell you what it's meant to me having you."

"I know what you're going to say," he said, leaning his broad back against the gate. "The fewer one's contemporaries become, the more attached one becomes to those who remain. And on the top of that, we've always been good friends, haven't we, Daisy? Because we've always understood each other, talked the same language."

He did not realise that he had plenty of ebullience of his own to withstand his sister's forceful personality. She neither drained nor exhausted him as she was inclined to do those "poorer fish" who had not the Saunders strain through them.

Liking to feel the sun warm his bared head and chatting pleasantly to each other, they sauntered back in a desultory fashion.

"A telephone message for you, Sir Miles," Davis's old voice sing-songed when they entered. "A Mr. Fenwick who said he was your secretary. Asked me to ask you to phone him at your London office as soon as you arrived back. Put me to a lot of trouble, he did. Got me to telephone the clubhouse when I told him you'd have left long since."

"Fenwick!" said Sir Miles, snapping his fingers with impatience. "He's like an understudy," he remarked to his sister, "who'd die of fright if he were ever called upon to take the stage! If he hasn't seen that Admiralty order through——"

Breathing stentoriously, he sat back in the comfortable chair to be put in touch with his secretary.

"Well, Fenwick, what is it?" he demanded when he

heard that precise voice clicking at the other end of the wires.

"It's a—greetings telegram, sir."

"A what?"

"A greetings telegram, sir. It came apparently on Wednesday. At your office, sir. Just after I had called for your morning mail. I telephoned Miss Low every morning since, sir, to hear about your letters in case anything arrived for me to attend to. They—they didn't bother about the greetings telegram, sir, thought it wouldn't be important, being greetings, you see, sir——"

"Yes, Fenwick?" Sir Miles said quietly.

"I opened it this morning, sir, when I arrived at the office, with the rest of your correspondence——"

"Naturally, Fenwick."

"Well, sir——" Something seemed to have happened to Fenwick's swallowing apparatus.

"Well, Fenwick?"

"Shall I read it to you, sir?"

"I think you'd better."

Across the wire jarred his secretary's voice reading the unbelievable words:

"Darling Daddy, just heard Roger has seven days embarkation leave. Have promised to marry him before he sails. Please get in touch with me at his mother's house, Ornum, 17, Fir Road, Princes Park, Glasgow, to arrange about wedding. Telephone number South 1047. Lovingly. Felicia."

Across the wires his secretary heard a silence that froze like ice receive his words.

"I picked up another telegram, sir, exactly the same, at your club this morning on my way to the office," he said, trying to drop something, even if only words, to break that frozen contact.

"When were these telegrams sent off?" The edge of his master's voice cut the silence into pieces.

"Both at the same time, sir: from Raldon Post Office, at nine-thirty a.m. on Wednesday."

Across the retina of Sir Miles Saunders' mind's eye there flitted the picture of a London street as his taxi drove off, with a whistling telegraph boy pulling from the pouch on his belt a greetings telegram.

Again Fenwick heard that icy silence, then the sound of the receiver plugged down, cutting them off.

"Whatever's the matter, Miles?" asked his sister. Appalled she gazed at his face: it was set hard as stone, alive only with the gleam of his eyes and mouth.

"I've to leave at once," he said. "Listen, Daisy, there's a wire from Felicia—two wires from Felicia—waiting for me in London. She says that fellow has seven days' leave and she wants to marry him before he sails."

"Miles," she said in consternation, following him from the room, "whatever will you do?"

"Do?" He gave a short hard laugh. "Do!" He stopped to face her. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Go straight north and stop that wedding although I have to drag her from him."

The shaky taxi drew up at Number 17, Fir Road. He told it to wait for him and pushed open the rickety gate. Something came off on his hands and he looked down to see vivid green paint. Bah, the whole damn place was coming to bits. To think of his Felicia in a second-rate hole like this. . . . He rang the bell with such power he could hear it outside jangling its message through the whole crazy structure.

Mrs. Munro came to the door. He stood on the twopenny ha'penny doorstep and glared at her.

"Won't you come in?" she asked quietly.

"I'll come in for one reason only," he said, striding into the hall, "to take my daughter out."

"I'm afraid your daughter isn't here to take away, Sir Miles," she replied. "She didn't hear from you, and Roger and she went south to catch you in London."

The blood seemed to be charging through too narrow veins in his head. He felt they were thickening, swelling, like cords, protuberant as the "bladders" on seaweed.

"So I'll catch them in London, will I?" The words cracked from him like pistol-shots. "Where?"

"I think I'd read this before you go," she replied, holding out to him a greetings telegram she picked up from the hall table, where a tennis ball kept it from fluttering in the draught when the front door opened.

He didn't take it from her. He didn't want to read it. He wanted to go to London to get his daughter at all costs—at all costs—at all costs. Silly the way the same words went round and round in your brain, filling it so that you wouldn't think of other things. He stared down at the telegram in her

hands. He would have to read it : he knew that. He was just putting off time.

Below the thistles, the roses and the daffodils, the shamrocks, the crown and the shield, he read the words :

" Were married to-day at twelve o'clock. Our love always. Felicia, Roger."

CHAPTER TEN

" I THINK," Mrs. Munro was saying gently, " I'd come and sit down for a moment or two, Sir Miles."

Standing massive in the tiny narrow hall, he glared at her as though he hated her. Which he certainly did. She was the embodiment of all he disliked, this man's mother. Not pulled down by her coming-to-pieces background but rising out of it as though it were a success. The little bit extra, he remembered thinking in the train going to his sister's, if only every one would give that little bit extra what a world it would be to live in. This woman, of course, would glory in giving more than a little bit extra, and who'd it benefit ? No one of importance, herself least of all. He'd like to tell her she'd always be where she was now—in difficulties, not enough to go round, the two ends never meeting.

But he'd be blowed if he would. He'd have not even the truck of speech with her. This woman who was now Felicia's mother-in-law. Damn it all, he felt she was sorry for him. He didn't want her pity. Sorry for him, not because her son had married his daughter, but because she saw the effect the news had upon him.

He'd rather have anyone's pity but hers. She was sorry for him, was she ? She should keep her sorrow for herself.

Without another word he strode through the open doorway and down the short garden path, swung back the gate and muttered an imprecation when more paint stuck to his hand. The gate swung to after him with a bit of a slam, as though glad to see the last of him.

The taxi of course couldn't take him to Newstones. He caught a train at Queen Street Station. It was Saturday evening and he knew none of the passengers who shared the first-class compartment with him. He sat in the best seat and stared straight before him. Felicia, his daughter,

his only child, the only thing he had left of *her*, married to that man. And he could do nothing about it. He was not accustomed to find himself in a predicament about which he could do nothing, pull wires and strings, heat irons. His broad brow corrugated, as though he were in physical pain.

All his happiness, all his joy, all his pleasure in living, were wrapped up in Felicia. That was the only reason why he was living, he realised, for her. And now there stretched before him the living part of life and no reason behind it whatsoever that he could see.

"Why, Sir Miles," exclaimed the stationmaster when he alighted at the small country station, "nice to see you on my platform! Motor cars have had a long enough innings to be sure. About time we got a look-in and it takes a war to give us it! As I always say, what you lose on the motor cars, you make up on the trains!"

He telephoned Morrison's Garage for a taxi for Sir Miles, who seemed a bit done-in now he came to look at him. The baronet waited for it in the station-master's room. He was going home to what? Loneliness, a too quiet house, no one waiting for him.

They had not expected him at Newstones and he felt a kind of excitement about the house whenever he entered. Mrs. Stimson soon explained why. The staff had received two telegrams from Miss Felicia, it seemed, one saying she was going to be married that day, the next that she was married. The housekeeper, as she helped her silent master out of his coat, gave him a shrewd look. Sir Miles—always one to have his own way, and now this. He was thinking: This was my daughter's wedding day, and his lip curled grotesquely, as he thought of what Newstones would have been like, what he would have seen it would be like, had she married Jules Trevere.

He went into his study, the room in the house that reminded him least of her. Now he saw what he had done all these years. To make his grief bearable over the loss of his young wife, he had poured all his love and affection into the child his young wife had borne him. Now he had lost not only his wife but the child she had given her life to give him, lost her to a nobody, lost her to "that man," as he would never have lost her had she married Jules Trevere. The Treveres moved in the same circle that they did, their background, friends, rendezvous were all the same; whereas the

background of the man Felicia had married was a pokey villa in a second-rate suburb, their friends probably butcher, baker, candle-stick maker—— Felicia, his daughter, who could have married any one, had thrown herself away on that.

Uncle Dick and Aunt Susan gave the "young people" lunch after the wedding at a "good" restaurant in the city. Everything went off very well, they said to each other on their way home together, remarking how a nice wedding like that did remind you of your own, didn't it? She couldn't believe it was all those years ago, Dick, and he said no wonder, when she hadn't changed a bit. A pity, of course, Felicia's father hadn't turned up, but as Uncle Dick said, as he fumbled for his key, what can you expect if you will cut off your nose to spite your face?

For their honeymoon, Roger took Felicia to a small inn down the river that Uncle Dick had told him about. He used to take their Aunt Susan there "before the children came" and it was really most romantic. Roger telephoned that morning for a double room, but as the inn was called *The Mouse And The Beetle*, neither he nor Felicia quite believed in it until they arrived. But there it was, romantic as ever and large as life, in fact larger, for it was more of an hotel now than an inn, having got on in the world since Uncle Dick's day. Roger nudged Felicia as they approached and asked her if she thought it would be the mouse or the beetle who'd attend to them!

As it happened, it was neither, but a pleasant manager, who bowed them into a room overlooking the river and waited hopefully at the door for their approval. Roger had a good look round and said casually, "Yes, we'll take this for the week-end," as though it wasn't the most wonderful room in all the world—as he laughed to her and she to him the moment they were left alone, when naturally they found themselves in each other's arms.

"Roger," said Felicia, "you did manage it well—he hasn't the faintest idea we're honeymoon!"

"I know, did you notice that," he said, with his splendid gurgle of laughter.

His arm round Felicia, they looked round the room, where the river outside made moving reflections on the ceiling, for they were in the old part of the inn where the ceilings were

low. Two of everything. Felicia, an only child, felt her lips tremble with happiness and she shut her eyes. He bent to kiss her lids.

"I'll get out of my dress," she said, "and put on a print, Roger."

"And I'll take you on the river," he said.

The funny little gaspy commonplace things one said that sounded so wonderful, breath-taking, because to-day was your wedding-day.

He had to go to see about a boat, but he couldn't bear to leave her even for a minute or two.

"Mrs. Munro!" he whispered in her ear.

"Mr. Munro!" she stood on tiptoe to whisper in his.

They kissed each other to show how wonderful each thought it was to be Mr. and Mrs. Munro.

She hung up her wedding-dress on Jill's coat-hanger and put it away in the double wardrobe, a shadowed ghostly place with a faint scent of all the clothes that had hung there and a regiment of wooden coat-hangers, all advertisements for something or other. By the time he came back for her, she was in a cool white-spotted print frock and putting on her sandals. He stooped to latch them for her.

They slipped down the river, under the overhanging green branches of trees which Felicia caught at as they passed. Roger told her the names of them, what birds would build in their branches, the colour of their eggs, stories about everything—she wasn't sure whether he was making up or relating, so difficult it was to know where the fairy-tale ended and Roger began. She looked at him as he sat before her, bending backwards and forwards as he rowed with easy strokes, in his white shirt. He had not brought his uniform to London and had been married in his "good" blue suit. She was so glad; it made her forget he was a soldier, that soon the gleaming, shining river she was looking at with such happy eyes would widen and widen until it was the sea separating them— Her breath caught. She must not darken their nearness to-day with even the shadow of a thought about the division so soon to come. She owed that not only to him but to herself. They must part strong with the memories of the perfection when they had been together, live on them until he came home.

What had she been thinking again? Where the fairy-tale ended and Roger began! Of course there was no division or

join—he was her fairy-tale, this was their once-upon-a-time, and all fairy-tales ended with living happily ever after. She could live happily ever after and so she knew could he, because he loved her and she him.

This lovely green summer's day that was their wedding day. He was to remember it always, to cool his thirst thinking of it as he drove across the burning desert, felt the sun smite the ground as though it were an anvil. Somewhere there was a river slipping beneath green trees, the cool sound of water lapping at the sides of a boat, and a girl in it dappled with sunlight and shadow—his girl, Felicia he had met at The Rose Bush, his wife waiting for him to come home.

"We've had a beautiful week-end," Felicia said happily to the manager of the hotel when they left early Monday morning.

"You certainly did strike it lucky with the weather," he remarked.

The weather! Felicia looked at Roger and Roger looked at Felicia. They really couldn't keep it to themselves any longer.

"We've got something to tell you," Felicia began.

"Yes, and we're coming back here after the war. Will you see we get room 18 then?"

"You see, my husband's on embarkation leave," explained Felicia.

"And this," said Roger, "is our honeymoon!"

"And you never knew!" they both bowed delightedly to him.

"Will look forward to seeing you after the war," remarked the manager. "Don't know about room 18 then though, sir. You see, that's the room we always give to our honeymoon couples!"

Their breaths completely taken away, Roger and Felicia gazed at him, a pleasantly melancholy individual who had raised himself from a waiter to an hotel of his own by dint of always appearing at a customer's side when he was wanted and disappearing when he wasn't.

"You knew all along!" gasped Felicia, who being the woman was the first to find her voice.

"Well, I never did!" exclaimed Roger.

"Had you down for room 27 when we received your 'phone call on Saturday morning, sir," replied the manager. "Changed

you over to room 18 whenever I saw you. Simply had to. You'd honeymoon written all over you. Delighted to see you both after the war—and you'll get room 18 then unless there are other candidates with a more primary claim! Can assure you of that!"

"Well," said Felicia, as she and Roger walked down the river road towards the station, "I can't get over that! Think of them knowing all the time! I don't know however they guessed, do you, Roger?"

"It's you, Felicia," he replied, managing to hug her although he was carrying her blouse-case as well as his own suitcase. "You give the whole show away! And it's always going to be the same! Even when we're quite old, in our thirties, everyone's going to think we're on our honeymoon! I know it. I can feel it in my bones!"

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with me at all," repudiated Felicia. "I managed, 'my husband has embarkation leave' beautifully, although I say it who perhaps shouldn't. No one would ever have known that was the first time I ever called you my husband—to anyone but you, I mean!"

"I called you my wife ages ago," Roger said proudly. "Just after we were married in fact. I said to the boatman, 'Can you give me a boat—I want to take my wife out on the river.'"

"No, Roger?" said Felicia, deeply interested.

"Yes, and he smiled in the funniest way," said Roger, remembering. "You don't think he's known too, do you? 'The young 'uns ask for a boat to take their wives out on the river,' he said, 'and the old uns for a boat, hoping they'll lose her in the river!'"

"I don't like the sound of him at all!" Felicia said stoutly.

They had to leave the secluded river path for the more public road that meandered across crossings to the station. As though by mutual consent, they paused to kiss one another.

"Darling," he whispered to her, "will you ever forget it?"

Her eyes told him she couldn't forget it, ever, as long as she had a finger to wear his ring and a heart with which to love him. And as they stood there where the path of their honeymoon became the road that led to everyday, they knew that was the secret each held for the other. No matter how old he grew, she knew she would always see looking out of his brown eyes the ardour of her bridegroom. And he

knew although her hair whitened, he would always see, mirrored in her face, as though in a keepsake locket, looking back at him, his bride.

They caught the ten o'clock train from Euston to Glasgow, for they had to return a day earlier than they could visit her father before Roger left, so he was spending two nights instead of one at home. The children were at Central Station to meet them, Jill calling out whenever she saw them in her carrying pipe of a voice :

"Oh, Roger, what does it feel like to be married?"

"Pretty good!" he assured her, giving her a hug.

Such a lovely meal waiting for them at Ornum. Felicia shuddered to think of the points Mrs. Munro must have given for the tongue. And a salad Prue had made, arranging it so beautifully it seemed a shame to eat it. Roger sat at the head of the table and told everyone to back in their carts for second helps. There was lemonade for the children, and everyone was explosive with mirth and happiness. This was a wedding picnic, Felicia couldn't help thinking, and the children were festive as favours. Her heart misgave her at the thought of to-morrow, when Roger was going to take her to Newstones to see her father. It wouldn't be like this there. That she knew, could feel her parent's disapproval chilly through his silence.

"You see, dear," Mrs. Munro explained, "he didn't know you were married when he came here. He came to stop the marriage. That was quite clear. He can't have got your wires, until it was too late; then he must have come racing north whenever he knew and passed you racing south to see him. I don't think I ever saw any one so upset as when he read your wire."

She hated rubbing some of the festivity from their home-coming with her news, but she had to prepare them for the type of reception they would receive at Sir Miles' hands to-morrow. She was in fact surprised that he was going to receive them at all, but Felicia had written to him on their honeymoon to say she and Roger would come to Newstones on Tuesday afternoon, his last day of leave, to see him there unless she heard to the contrary. She had not heard to the contrary or otherwise.

Their honeymoon, Mrs. Munro thought suddenly, looking out of the window: married on Saturday, home on Monday, parted on Wednesday. Surely Felicia's father, however

disappointed he was that she had not chosen the husband he would have liked her to choose, would remember how pitifully brief her honeymoon had had to be. Mrs. Munro tried to sun herself with this thought, but remembering the implacability of Sir Miles Saunders' back as he strode down the garden path, she was not quite so reassured as she would have liked. She had a glimmering that there was one point of view and one point only Sir Miles' shrewd eyes were capable of seeing. That was his own. She was right. Indeed it was to this characteristic that he attributed his success in life, for he always felt he was right. And he loved success: it was what he believed in, one of the very few things he believed in.

Roger and Felicia were rather quiet on the bus journey next day from Glasgow to her home. Neither could deny to themselves that the meeting with her father was going to be an ordeal. Of course it might go off better than any one expected, thought Roger, who had his mother's sanguine nature. Now the vows were taken, the troth sealed, her father might make the best of a bad business. The only thing was he felt Felicia's dad had never encountered bad business in the past to make the best of!

They were sitting in the front seat and in the glass screen before them Felicia could see the reflection of the husband at her side. He wasn't in uniform but in his "good" navy blue suit, the one she liked him in best of all. As she saw that handsome strong young face looking reflectively in front of him, she hugged his arm close to her. No one, not even her father, could help loving Roger once they saw him.

They descended from the bus at the gates of Newstones, and before they entered, gravely went and looked at the spot there they had met, as though paying a pilgrimage.

"If you hadn't waited until I came out from under the lorry——" he said.

"Oh, Roger," she said, "think if you hadn't drawn up here of all places——"

They looked at each other, appalled even to consider such dreadful unsuspected possibilities that might have been.

"It was meant!" he explained. "It was fated, Felicia, that's what it was. It happened but it didn't just happen. Nothing could have stopped it from happening. That's what I mean."

"Nothing," she said, "I was waiting for you, Roger, and I never knew! I thought nothing was ever going to happen."

"And I thought, 'What the heck's gone wrong with this old bus?' I pulled it up just there, Felicia, where I knew it would be safe. And when I came out from under it—you were there!"

"It all sounds too good to be true," she said, holding on to him suddenly, as she sometimes did, as though to prove to herself he was really and truly there.

Gayer and more confident, fortified by the thought of the power of fate, they walked up the avenue. Fate had brought them so far, surely it wouldn't, couldn't let them down now. But when they rounded the magnificent sweep of an avenue and Roger saw Newstones for the first time, he had to admit he was taken aback. He had expected a big place, but not anything like this. Why, Jill and Tim and them all at home would have described this place as a castle, while to those more adult, whose imagination was clipped off airy fairy towers and enchanted turrets, it was certainly a mansion-house.

And Felicia, the princess in the castle, had married him, a poor man, and not thought herself any the poorer. She had come to Ornum as though it were another Newstones, only asked of them one thing—to be one of them, to "share." She felt him suddenly stop to kiss her cheek.

"Oh, Miss Felicia," Mrs. Stimson, the housekeeper, greeted her in the handsome hall, "I'm so glad to see you. How do you do, sir." She took Roger's warm grasp in her reserved one. "Oh, Miss Felicia, you know you have my very best wishes." Her voice implied that poor Miss Felicia would need them. "And you too, sir, I'm sure, although with our Miss Felicia you've got the best of everything any one could wish you! But it's your father, Miss Felicia. He's in his study. Sat there—when he's at home—ever since he heard, Miss Felicia. Just like the days after your mother's funeral."

Felicia felt Roger draw himself up beside her, with a gesture of disapproval. Beside him, she made her way along the corridors, her heart faltering now not only at the thought of what her father would say to Roger but at what Roger might say to her father!

"Hallo, daddy," she said when she entered, and crossed the room to kiss him.

He was sitting at the fire which was lit, although the day,

a mild yellow day of early autumn, was not cold. And he rose as she came towards him, stooping his head that she could kiss his cheek, but he did not kiss her in return. She noticed that as she was meant to notice.

"And this is Roger, daddy," she said pleadingly.

Formally her father nodded to his son-in-law. He did not apparently see the younger man's outstretched hand.

"How do you do?" he asked calmly. "I believe we've met before, have we not?"

"Yes, on business of my mother's, you remember," replied Roger. "The Sharon Lane property."

He did not know what it was about this man but he annoyed him exceedingly. The urbane implications of his sentences had the effect of drawing from the hotter headed younger man replies like retaliations. He was not, however, so hot headed that he didn't realise this was exactly the "power" the urbane Sir Miles desired to wield over him.

"Your mother is pleased she still has her property?" remarked Sir Miles, smiling faintly at nothing in particular just above his son-in-law's head.

"Her lawyers are even more pleased," returned Roger, morbidly wondering if he would be able to keep his temper and crossing his fingers to remind himself that he really must—for Felicia's sake. "But we didn't come here, sir, to discuss a piece of business over and done with weeks ago."

"No?" smiled Sir Miles.

"No," repeated Roger, anything but smiling. "We came here to discuss our wedding."

"Indeed?" acknowledged Sir Miles, looking from one to the other with false geniality. "So you're married now?"

"You know we are," rapped out Roger.

"Yes. I know you are." His voice shook with the intensity of his feelings and he raised it to give the lie that it had shaken with anything but anger. Like the drawing off a slate, all urbanity was brushed from his face, leaving it heavy and implacable as stone. "You're married now. By a matter of hours, you can congratulate yourselves that you're married now. I arrived too late." For the first time in my life, he thought bitterly.

"No, daddy," came Felicia's quiet voice, "you didn't arrive too late. Even if you had arrived in time, you wouldn't have stopped my marrying Roger."

His lips compressed, he looked at her. He had never

thought of that before, never. He had thought all he had had to do was arrive in time like an avenging god and put an end to the whole sorry business. Now, as he looked at his daughter standing slenderly beside the man she called her husband, he realised that even if he had arrived in time, she would still be calling the man she stood beside her husband.

He was beaten, and he knew it. But he was the type who never gave in. To admit defeat was worse than to know you were beaten.

"And why," he asked, jaunty again, "am I honoured with this visit?"

"Roger's going to-morrow, daddy. We wanted you to be at our wedding, didn't we, Roger?"

"I would never have attended your wedding," Felicia's father informed them.

"Then it's a good thing things fell out as they did," Roger rattled out. "After all, Sir Miles, your daughter's wedding wasn't a funeral, and you're the only mourner who didn't attend!"

The young cub—who needed his ears boxed. Sir Miles' eyes sparked at any one daring to speak to him like this, yet through the younger's man's words, in spite of himself, he detected the sanity of the younger generation, a sanity that cut out the dead wood of the past, vigorous enough to live in the present. After all, the present was all the younger generation could bank on in a major war.

He was getting maudlin, that was what he was, losing grip of himself entirely and the situation. The situation was that his daughter had married a man who was a nobody, who needed his ears boxed. Sir Miles thanked himself sarcastically to remember that.

"And you just thought you'd look in and see me?" he said over pleasantly. "Very kind of you, I'm sure."

"Daddy, Roger's going to-morrow," Felicia said again. Oh, surely, knowing that, he couldn't go on like this.

"It's not because I'm going to-morrow I came," Roger informed him, quite forgetting and uncrossing his fingers. "I'll tell you why I've called, sir. I want to know what's going to happen to Felicia after to-morrow—when I've gone."

"Indeed?" Sir Miles appeared surprised. "Surely her husband will have made every provision for that eventuality."

"He has," replied Roger. "He has thought it all out."

He knew you'd be like this. He knows why you're being like this too. Felicia will stay with my mother until I come back."

That second-rate villa with the paint coming off on your hands, with that woman who appeared to be unaware she was living in peeling squalor—Sir Miles eyes blazed.

"She'll do nothing of the kind," he thundered. "She'll remain with me."

"I only wanted to know," Roger said politely.

He was the amiable one now, Sir Miles the one who was rattled. At this point, Mrs. Stimson mercifully brought in tea. The comfortable figure of the housekeeper struck Felicia as being next door to the form of an angel arriving at that moment. Tea progressed, or rather jerked forward or marked time on little spurts of social conversation conceded by Sir Miles, who now felt himself more than master of the situation. Indeed, more than once, Felicia would have liked to shake him, which was rather like the leaf wanting to shake the oak.

"Nice watch," he remarked, eyeing the obviously new watch on Roger's lean brown wrist when he stretched out for the cup Felicia handed him.

"Isn't it a beauty?" Roger said eagerly. "Felicia gave it to me for my wedding-present."

And Sir Miles' eyes watched the young man's face suddenly fall as his gaze wandered to the engagement ring on his wife's left hand—a tuppenny ha'penny arrangement her father had noticed at once, with a big pearl surrounded by a lot of little ones—that kind of ring. He was thinking as Sir Miles meant him to think: Compared with the watch Felicia's given me, the ring I gave her isn't up to much.

He should have felt triumphant at the younger man's discomfiture. Instead, to his own surprise, he heard himself jerk out to his daughter:

"Nice ring you've got there."

"Isn't it, daddy." She stretched her hand towards him that he might see better the ring she so proudly wore.

"I couldn't afford a really expensive one," his son-in-law was saying, "so I thought it was better to get good pearls than cheap diamonds. If you know what I mean."

Sir Miles knew what he meant. The first thing he had agreed with his son-in-law over: better a little of the real thing than a great show of paste. He drew himself up quickly.

A good thing he wasn't seeing much more of this young man or, before he knew where he was, he'd be liking him. And of course that was quite out of the question. You couldn't like the nobody your daughter had married against your wishes. He thought of Jules Trevere and the ring he could have slipped on to his daughter's finger.

So their good-byes were as formal as their greetings had been, although Sir Miles did manage to go to the door to see his daughter and her husband off.

"I'll be home the day after to-morrow," Felicia said as she kissed him, "in time for dinner, daddy," for she knew he did hate having his meals alone. And she thought, a little sick, the day after to-morrow Roger will have gone.

He kissed her now in return, some bitterness in his gratitude that at least she still thought of Newstones as "home."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FELICIA went to bed early that night, for she wanted to leave Roger alone on his last night with his mother. It had come, what had been lying in wait at the end of his seven days' leave, that dreaded "last night."

She heard the murmur of their voices on the stairs long after twelve, heard him kiss his mother good-night outside on the landing, saw the hall light enter the room, as he pushed open the door, in the form of a capital T. He had once told her, she remembered, that when they were ill as children, the night nursery door was always left ajar at night, and the light from the landing made a giant zigzag T on the wall. It gave him such a cosy feeling, he said. Oh, why, why, why had men and women to grow up, leave the night nursery, the landing where the light came from, the house of home, and go—where?

He bent over her to see if she were asleep. Asleep! She wondered how she was ever going to sleep again as she put up her arms to draw him towards her.

The children were quiet at breakfast time next morning, but his mother was just as she always was, keeping the ball rolling as smoothly as ever. As Felicia watched her, she vowed she was going to be like her.

"I do believe," she was saying, "that one is what one is

because one is what one is, if you know what I mean! I mean, I know my nose would have been regrettably retouched if I hadn't taken it in time and thought every night before I fell asleep when I was a schoolgirl of the nose I wanted to have." Whatever one thought of Mrs. Munro's theories, one had to admit, looking at the discussed feature, that they had worked with remarkable effect there. "It's a good thing I did," she said in her happy laughing way, "for your father always said that he married me because of my nose!"

Felicia was to go to the station to see Roger off, and the children came with her to walk down the road that he might say good-bye to their mother alone. He made up on them a little later. She didn't go to the garden gate and he didn't look back. At the end of the red gravel road, the children stood, their trotting walk halted. Roger took his rifle from Denys, his service respirator from Tim. Denys was shaking hands with him, telling Roger he wasn't to worry about "them at home"—Denys would see they were all right. Felicia turned away as he stooped to kiss his small sisters and Tim.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder on top of the bus, knowing that her blouse-case was no longer beside his kitbag, helping him to carry everything once they arrived in Glasgow and made for Central Station. He had so much to carry, he must feel like a pack-horse, yet it seemed so little when one looked at his stuffed kitbag and realised that was all he was taking abroad with him. The rest was the paraphernalia of war.

They found him a corner seat in a third-class compartment, and she carefully folded his coat and put it away on the rack, telling him where she was putting his sandwiches for the journey so that he wouldn't sit down on them. They walked up and down the platform, his arm through hers, her hand holding his. Such a little hand, he thought, holding it to him: he didn't suppose anyone had such a little hand. And he remembered thinking, like Burns' poem, that if only she were his, he would wear her in his bosom lest her beauty "it should tine." She was his, now and forever, yet he had to leave her.

They smiled to each other, just to explain to the other why they weren't bothering to talk. The giant hand of the station clock jerked ominously near ten. She felt her throat

dry and rough as sandpaper. Everyone was getting into the train. The hand of the clock was reaching the hour.

"Time for getting in, soldier," said the guard.

She lifted up her face to her husband's: he saw it tremulous as a reflection in water. She was smiling to him.

"I've promised," she said, "never to say good-bye."

He held her to him fiercely, felt the sweetness again of her face against his—like kissing a spring morning, he remembered thinking the first time he kissed her. More than ever like a spring morning, with dew on the grass and rain bright in the sun.

"No, no," he said, his voice harsh with feeling, "never good-bye. There's no such word, Felicia, between you and me."

He tore himself from her. She saw him leaning as far out of the corridor window as he could lean. The train began to tug from the station with its burden of steel and iron, its over-laden luggage-vans, its precious freight of human lives. And as she heard it chug past her, the chugging became a churning in her ears, the train a boat, seas separating them instead of just a platform. She began to run beside it, her face white, her eyes wide, until she checked herself. He must see her last as she would like to remember he had seen her: not desperate as a child, but as his wife, waiting on the platform as she would wait for him to return home.

She managed to wave to him, to call out "God bless you," she even managed to smile, before the train swung out of sight, its every window filled with waving people.

She walked down the platform, amongst those who had been seeing their loved ones off, the smile still shakily upon her face, that no one would see what she was feeling below it. She gave up the platform ticket *he* had bought for her at the barricade, and then she stopped short.

"Prue!" she exclaimed.

For there was Prue in the print dress that hadn't washed very successfully and hung unevenly front and back, with the hat she wore on Sundays, to make her "respectable" for town, only she had forgotten to put it on. Her small bobbed head, shining like a bell, sitting with slender pride on her white little neck.

"I know," said Prue, thrusting her hot hand into Felicia's gloved one, "it's me." She gave a frantic sniff: her dress

had no pockets so handkerchiefs were out of the question. "I told Roger I would come and meet you, Felicia. Just to be with you, you know, afterwards. He said he'd think of us, so we mustn't cry, Felicia. He won't be thinking of us crying," a desperate sniff this time, "so it wouldn't be playing fair."

"No," agreed Felicia, "that wouldn't be playing fair, Prue."

As she felt the child's light weight leaning against her in the bus, she realised she felt towards little Prue what Roger felt towards her. And as she sat with her arm round her, taking care of someone instead of being taken care of, she knew that moment, when she had felt Roger's lips upon hers in his farewell kiss, that she had grown up. She had received her initiation. She could pull her weight now with the best of them.

Pretending not to see the gate he had painted, then she forced herself to look at it. Lovingly she ran her fingers over it, thinking of all their jokes and laughter when he mended and painted it, the terrible catastrophe that nearly happened when Jill knocked the paint-tin over, and everyone thought it would all be spilt. Only Roger said there was none left to spill! Besides if you were told not to cry over spilt milk, why cry over spilt paint?

The little house, its door wide open, seemed very empty somehow. His mother came out of her bedroom, and Felicia knew she had been on her knees, praying for her son, for her, his wife, for all who went with him and for those he left behind.

"He got a corner seat," Felicia bowed reassuringly to her, "but of course you know what that means, Mrs. Munro!"

"Of course, dear," returned his mother. "It will be given to the one lady or elderly gentleman within the first ten minutes!"

"Within the first five minutes," corrected Felicia, hugging her. "He's more like you than you are yourself!"

She knew Roger was not sitting in his comfortable corner seat. He was outside in the corridor watching with eyes that saw nothing the scenery flying past, his cigarette finished and he'd forgotten to light another one—

Jennie, the little daily, without being asked, interrupted her gusty morning cycle of dusting and sweeping to bump down before her mistress and "Mrs. Roger" a nice freshly

brewed cup of tea. The best china too, as though Jenny thought company were coming. But Mrs. Munro, her eyes wet for the first time that morning, realised that Jenny thought they were company, the mother and wife of the soldier who had "left" that day, and she felt humble and uplifted by the compliment.

Felicia put her hand across the faded green tablecloth to hold her mother-in-law's.

"I thought," she said, "of staying with you until tomorrow, if you'd let me."

"My dear," replied Mrs. Munro, "you know how much that would mean to me. You see, Felicia, you're not one of the children." She wasn't looking at her. "You're Roger's wife and I'm his mother. We don't need to pretend, do we, dear? We don't even need to speak about it. I know you know, and you know I know. That's why there is a consolation and a helpfulness in each other's presence."

At the midday meal, everyone pretended everything was just the same as it always was. Denys sat where Roger used to sit and said invitingly, "Back in your carts, folks," his voice going husky so that he angrily cleared his throat, but no one felt they wanted a second help, thank you very much. Everyone gave the longest excuse why they didn't happen to be hungry, except Felicia, who handed in her plate to be rewarded from Denys by his sudden smile.

That night, alone in the bedroom that used to be called the "night nursery," one part of her waiting for Roger's step on the stair, the other part knowing it would not come. And as she lay listening to the night wind dirling in the chimney, as he must have listened to it when he was wee, she remembered asking herself in her agony the night before why men and women had to grow up, why they couldn't be kept safe and cosy for always in a night nursery, where the light from the landing made a giant zigzag T on the wall. She knew the answer now. She no longer wished to be lapped round with security, everything "kept" from her, for everything meant the good as well as the bad. You couldn't have meetings without partings. The more one's heart unfolded to love, the stronger one became to bear the worst that could befall one. Like Roger's mother, she thought, at last beginning to fall into a merciful drowse. That was what she believed. But she would not say the worst that could befall one. She would say the best. For Felicia knew that her mother-in-law,

despite the stroke of death parting her from him she held most dear, thought of the happiness and radiance he had brought into her life, rather than the short time he had been granted to her. With her hand below her cheek as Roger had loved to watch her, she slept.

She left Ornum late the following afternoon, staying with her mother-in-law as long as she could, for she knew her presence there made a difference to her. But she could not face going home by bus: that would remind her too forcibly of the shoulder she used to lean against that was no longer there. Those riotous journeys to Glasgow! When she and Roger and Rosemary had gone to visit his mother that Sunday afternoon, and that other glorious one, after their "wedding breakfast" at The Rose Bush, when they had speeded to Glasgow full of the news of their marriage.

So she caught a train instead of a bus. Denys and Prue and Jill all came to the station to see her off. She saw them standing on the receding platform waving to her, all with that slightly breathless feeling that characterised a Munro, as though they had run too fast or were holding their breaths for a great surprise that was just going to pop at them from round the corner. Roger's sisters and brothers. She sat back on the seat. She had always wanted brothers and sisters, a whole big family of them, "both kinds"—Roger, who had given her so much, had even given her that.

"Well, well," the genial station-master greeted her when she dismounted from the train, "I had your father on my platform the other day," he spoke as though this occurrence had honoured both his platform and himself, "and now I've you, Miss Saunders! But you're not Miss Saunders any longer, Miss Saunders! If what I'm hearing is true! You're a married woman now—Mistress Munro they're calling you now!"

"Mrs. Roger Munro," Felicia dimpled at him. "I have a mother-in-law you see, Mr. Gardiner, the dearest mother-in-law in the world."

"And your lad was on embarkation leave, so you got married afore he went. I think you were right, Miss Felicia—Mrs. Roger Munro that is! Mebbe, it's with seeing so many trains coming and going, with different folk off them every day, or just passing through, that makes me feel——" He stopped short and stood looking down at her with his kind lined face. "Just the other day," he remarked, "when I

used to see you driven about in a carriage all to yourself—your pram !”

“ I can remember you as far back as that, Mr. Gardiner,” Felicia told him. “ I remember you as the gentleman who, summer or winter, always wore a flower in his button-hole.”

He looked down at the little double chrysanthemum in his button-hole this evening, turning the lapel of his coat upwards that he could smell his flower. He took it out and gave it to her.

“ You’re like the flower I wear in my button-hole, summer or winter,” he said. “ Your lad will have told you that, so an old man can tell you it too, who minds you when you were just flower high yourself ! When he comes home, bring him to see me, miss. He must be a fine lad for our Miss Felicia to have married, I said to my wife when she told me.”

“ When he comes home ”—the words jiggled in Felicia’s head as she hurried along the road to Newstones. Now she was feeling the reaction of Roger’s departure as never before. Returning to Ornum, she had Mrs. Munro to sustain and be sustained by, the children to help, the sweet intimacy of his home to comfort her, the chairs he had touched, the doors he had opened and shut, the stairs he had rattled up and down. But as she passed up the avenue to Newstones, she found herself bereft of that warm link with him. She was returning to her own home, where her husband was not only not cherished but actively disliked.

She went into the sun parlour where Stimmy told her her father was. Across the room still warm with the heat of the day, father and daughter faced each other.

There was no good telling her, in words well calculated to leave their hurt, that he had no desire to hear her mention her husband’s name while she remained under his roof. Something in Felicia’s face forbade any thrusts or goads : besides he realised, for he was no fool, he could no longer either thrust or goad her. She was long past that stage. Lamely he heard himself jerk out :

“ Nice to see you home again, Felicia.”

She came and sat on the arm of his chair, as she used to do when she was small, to tell him all the breathless happenings that had taken place since he had kissed her good-bye in the morning. But now he knew so breathless a happening had taken place in her life that she could speak of it to no one, himself least of all.

"Nice to see you again, daddy," she said, her head turned away that he did not see her face. "Daddy, I want to say something to you—right at the beginning. I've come home because you need me, don't you? I mean, to drive your car, because you're on war work."

So that was why she had come home! His face reverted to its customary kindness as an amused expression kindled his eyes. Not for worlds would he let her know that she was not absolutely indispensable to him.

"Daddy," she was saying, "this is my war work, isn't it, driving you about? Then, daddy, it's got to be full time." Smiling she looked down at him as he lay back in the comfortable chair. "There's got to be no more 'holidays' for me, no more 'Fenwick can drive me to-day.'" She was his gay Felicia again—but a Felicia with a difference, with an intrepidity about her he was quick to notice, for he had always been lion-hearted himself. "If you don't take proper use of my services," she informed him, "I'll join one of the services, where they jolly well will!"

Changed days, he thought—he was now receiving the ultimatums instead of delivering them! His emotions were so conflicting that he was not sure whether he was pleased or not. Perhaps it was something to know that he was not altogether displeased. He must, he supposed, get it out of his head that Felicia was still a child, whose footsteps he directed in the way he thought they should go. After all, and he smiled wryly, Felicia's own footsteps had led her in precisely the last direction he could have wished them to go. He really had remarkably little say now in what concerned her. He knew he would have to stop letting her "play at work." The Felicia who had married a man he heartily disliked would not stop short at joining one of the services. He had met his match, and he knew it. Despite her fairness which leant her fragility and her slenderness, she would prove herself as indomitable as himself—as he could wish her to be, he found himself adding.

"A pistol is a pistol held at one's head, no matter how white the hand holding it!" he replied good-humouredly. "All right, have it your own way. You're doing much more important work driving me than you'd be doing in khaki, let me tell you, when you'd be driving some raw subalterns to it wouldn't really matter where!"

And he thought to himself, Well, Miles Saunders, you

never thought the day would come—did you?—when you'd be thankful for such small mercies. At least he had Felicia with him. That was something to be grateful for, something the war alone was responsible for as it had been responsible for her hasty marriage. Anything could happen between now and "afterwards."

"You see, daddy," she said, sitting too quietly on the arm of his chair, "I want every moment of every day filled with something worth while—till he comes home."

He gave her profile a quick look, and as quickly looked away, disturbed by what he saw there. She apparently imagined she was still in love with that most unsuitable husband of hers, looked upon her marriage as a kind of life and death affair. For the first time in his life at a loss for something to say, her father said nothing.

She rose, after kissing his forehead, and went upstairs, carrying her coat. That handsome carved staircase she could remember as far back as she could remember anything—to think she had run up and down it in the past and never known where one day it was going to lead her to! To the front door, on her "real" birthday, and just outside their gates, to Roger! Her hand trailing up the bannister, as though she felt it communicated her with him, she reached her room.

Inside she found Annie, trim and neat in her black uniform, her white frilly cap, her cuffs and pretty apron a-flutter with excitement.

"I've got unpacked for you, Miss Felicia!" she exclaimed. "Just to get your wedding-dress hung up as soon as possible. My! it's lovelier than I even thought, miss, and just as though it had never been worn! What did he say when he saw you, Miss Felicia?—afterwards I mean! When you were alone together?" Her small face peaked anxiously with feeling as she thought what a short time poor Miss Felicia and the tall young private had had alone together. "I bet he thought you were out of the top drawer all right!" she prattled on happily.

"I told him all about you, Annie," said Felicia, sitting down on her bed, "and how you had packed it for me and everything. Do you remember that night?" she said, living it all over again. Her heart strings jerked as she thought, Why it was just ten days ago.

"Don't I and a half," Annie said, lowering her voice

sepulchrely as they discussed the secret they shared. "I didn't let on to no one I'd known about it all along, even when your first telegram came, Miss Felicia." She didn't say how "reel hard" it had been to keep her own counsel, with Cathy, one of the kitchen-maids, giving herself unbearable airs that she'd been the first to see Miss Felicia with her young man at The Rose Bush.

"Annie," said Felicia, her face bright with what she was going to say, "I want you to do something for me. I told Mr. Roger, and he said it was the very thing."

"Yes, Miss Felicia?" Annie said eagerly.

"When you get married to your Ned, Annie, I want you to be married in that dress. You remember, Annie, you said blue for a bride!"

"No, miss, you don't mean it—you can't mean it." Annie's voice went into a shrill pipe with emotion and then disappeared altogether. "Me—in this—what you wore. Oh, Miss Felicia!" She began to sniff rapturously. "There am I, my mother all over again," she excused, "just the thought of a wedding is enough to set me off! Bob—he's my brother, miss—says he hopes Ned won't marry a water-spout! Oh, miss, I can't believe it——"

"You get into it afterwards, Annie," laughed Felicia, "then you'll believe it all right! The only thing is it may be a little short, but there's a hem and it can be lengthened."

"Mebbe," said Annie, looking at the hem, "there's plenty to let down, isn't there? Of course, I like wearing my things short," said Annie, who knew she had pretty legs, "but you can be too short, can't you, Miss? Will you see me in it afterwards and tell me? If you'll keep me right, Miss Felicia! Oh, miss, what do you think mother will say? And the wedding's coming off, Miss Felicia—there's been so much to tell you I haven't got it in! Christmas, miss—what d'you think of that? Ned won't know me in this, Miss Felicia, so he won't! I'll keep it as good as new, miss, for you'll want it back to show your children the dress you were married in."

"No, Annie," said Felicia, "you're to keep it—it's yours—to show your children the dress you were married in."

"I don't know what I've done to deserve all this," said Annie. "I don't know, I'm sure," and the happy sniff gave evidence of becoming Bob's prophesied water-spout. "What

mother will say, Miss Felicia. She knows all about you, of course, for I'm never done telling her about you on my night out. But this will fair wind her, just as it has me. Can I keep it in your wardrobe, miss, as I share mine with Cathy and she's a great believer in moth balls—— Oh, miss," said Annie, awed as she let the misty blue material trail between her fingers, before she put it away, "how you can do this—I just don't know."

"Annie, dear," said Felicia, and the maid saw her eyes were a deeper blue than she had ever seen them. She never thought they were deepened with tears because Miss Felicia was smiling to her as happily as anything. "I want to give you the dress even more than you want to have it! It's a thank offering, Annie. I couldn't begin to tell anyone what I have to be thankful for——"

Married to Roger so that before he said good-bye he could call her his wife as she could call him her husband, that enchanted week-end at The Mouse And The Beetle, slipping down the river below the green trees hung with nursery rhymes and fairy-tales, her shoes beside his outside the door—Annie saw something happen to the smile upon her young mistress's face.

"It's easy for the rich to give," the maid said jerkily. "That's what mother always says, and minds us of the widow's mite. But it's sharing that counts, miss. That's what mother says. Rich folks give handsomely, but when it comes to sharing, they clap their hands on what they've got and say 'That's mine.' But you're doing more than just giving me my wedding-dress, Miss Felicia. You're sharing it with me. And I won't forget that—ever—not this side of time," vowed Annie, shutting the wardrobe door at last with a great show of determination, knowing full well she would be "in at it" again that evening when she came to turn down Miss Felicia's bed. "I just hope," said Annie, now weak with happiness, "that I'll be as good a wife to my Ned as you are to your Mr. Roger, and not go letting that dress and all of us down."

It was a curious experience for Felicia to pick up the threads of her life anew where her marriage had broken them off. She felt so different from that Felicia who had spent so much of her life in a loneliness she would never feel again in the beauty and exclusiveness of her home. Yet it was only a matter of several days since she, who was now Felicia

Munro, had been Felicia Saunders. She did not know that Roger had experienced the self-same experience she was going through, the viewing of the familiar from a changed aspect, when he sat up by himself in his silent home the night before they travelled south.

Instead of receiving letters and presents before her wedding, she received them afterwards. She liked Rosemary's the best of all, a long letter from one who did not find a pen an easy tool to wield, dotted with exclamation marks like a musical score, bursting with happiness for Felicia and Roger, and interspersed with the latest happenings on the farm where she now worked as a land girl. Felicia put it into an envelope to send to Roger whenever she knew his address.

There was a marked note of reserve in her aunt's letter of congratulations, wishing her happiness with so much emphasis that one felt Aunt Daisy was convinced good wishes were the only assets "poor Felicia" would get out of so unfortunate a match. But Fenwick, her father's secretary, was the person who found himself in the most difficult quandary. Did one congratulate a bride on her marriage when one knew that the bride's father, who happened to be one's master, had left no stone unturned to prevent that marriage? But when he saw "their Miss Felicia" driving her father to his office as usual, he ventured to say to her, once Sir Miles was well beyond earshot, "My felicitations, Miss Felicia," perturbed to hear himself making something not unlike a pun, which was the last thing Fenwick would ever attempt to do of his own free will.

So a week passed, driving her father to Glasgow, to his appointments, docks and yards, the long waits in the car until he came out of whatever building he had been visiting, attended by the manager, the chairman of the firm, the head partner, always given a send-off as though he were royalty: driving him home in the evening, dinner in the lofty dining-room "just by themselves" as he liked best to be, or with his friends to visit them for a rubber of bridge. She seemed to have been doing that for a cycle of years, yet only a week had passed since she had felt Roger's lips kissing hers good-bye on the platform of Central Station.

Alone in her own room at night was almost like escape, free to think of him, to write to him the happenings of the day which became vital when she wrote of them to him. She had written him so many letters in this passing week!

Letters she was keeping safe to send him whenever she knew where he was.

She was in a heavy dreamless sleep seven days after he had gone when she found herself sitting upright in bed. She moved the fair hair out of her eyes to look at the clock, illuminating the dark with its tiny face. Twenty past four. Country people said when silences fell, that angels were passing over at twenty past the hour; Roger had told her that. The house was empty of sound as a sea-shell on the shore is empty of everything save itself.

Twenty past four on Thursday morning. Felicia lent back on her pillows, her eyes wide awake. She knew, with that awareness which bound her to Roger, served as a communication cord between them, that at this very moment an iron-clad ship was leaving the uneven shores of the country, where it had been forged, to take its place in convoy and plough across the seas to other shores. An iron-clad ship with thousands of men aboard. And one in these thousands was Roger.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I NEVER heard anything so ridiculous," said her father, obviously disgruntled.

"But, daddy," Felicia protested, "everyone else is doing something like that. There must be something wrong with me if it's just ridiculous when I do it!"

"You're doing plenty with these long working hours without adding to them slopping out tea in some wretched railway canteen."

"I'll only slop out tea for an hour," Felicia told him. "They change your duty every hour, so that everyone gets a chance of the pick of the jobs."

"And what," demanded her father, glaring, "does the pick of the jobs at the Y.M.C.A. canteen in Raldon station happen to be?"

"The tables," she told him, delighted to be informative, and she nodded to him reassuringly. "Everyone likes being 'on the tables' best, that is the younger ones anyway. The older ones prefer the kitchen, working behind the limelight, y'know. Really, daddy," she said laughingly to him, "you'd

think I had signed on for life instead of promising to give only two nights a week——”

“Two nights a week,” he said disgustedly. “You’re to go about promising nothing more. I’ll only let you go to this ridiculous canteen if you’ll promise me you’ll make no more promises to anyone. We’ll have you offering your services to the Cabinet next!”

“I’ll leave that to you,” she said laughingly, rubbing her brow on his arm.

Her father of course would never understand what the canteen meant to her. The steam and clatter of the kitchen, the bustle and stir of comings and goings in the long, always crowded “feeding-room.” Here she felt “in” things. This was part of Roger’s life before he sailed, was still a part of it although she knew now he was in the Middle East. She might be serving some of his friends for all she was to know. Sausage and mash, bacon and chips, or what about batter and chips for a change? Coffee for the sailors, roll sandwiches made up for two soldiers travelling south, an airman wondered if she had a needle and thread? She sewed the button on for him, heard he was twenty years of age, from Halifax in Canada, and had Scotch relations in Glasgow he’d never seen but was on his way to visit. American dough-boys calling her ma’am and lady, Polish privates bowing so politely when she served them with the thick canteen cups and plates, a Czechoslovak soldier with a square head, fair-haired Norwegian sailors—foreigners in a land she’d do her best to make a little less strange to them, foreigners as Roger was now a foreigner in a strange land. And all “their own men”: the snappy Royal marines, airborne troops in their smart plum-coloured berets, tall Grenadiers, picked Commandos, soldiers wearing ribbons of the last war, airmen wearing ribbons for this one, sailors asking where they could have a dance, men going on leave, men re-joining their regiments, ships, stations. Aswirl with comings and goings, exits and entrances, kit-bags and forage caps, rifles and respirators. Men who needed attended to, something done for them, as they “passed through.” And always that sudden wild beating at her heart when she caught sight of the familiar badge of the Royal Engineers, the badge she still wore on her coat, Roger’s first present to her on that day of days, her “real birthday.”

“You don’t know me, Miss Saunders,” a smiling young

private in the H.L.I. remarked to her, "but I know you! I'm Bill Brough, the butcher's boy, and used to see you out with your governess when I was delivering the messages!"

"Oh, Bill, did you?" she said delightedly. "And how are you? I want to hear all about you. I'm not Saunders any more, you know, Bill! I'm Mrs. Munro, and my husband's out east with the Royal Engineers."

Something so easeful to talk about him to these men, his comrades in arms. They all asked the same questions about him, his age, his work, his regiment. He was one of them and she, through him, was one of them too. She belonged here as much as she belonged in his own home.

Letters were beginning to come from him and she knew now he was in the Middle East. "It's not as though it were the Far East," she said to comfort Mrs. Munro when she telephoned her, but she knew his mother knew she knew that the Middle East, where so much was happening, was heartbreakingly far.

Felicia telephoned Roger's home every single Sunday evening. These calls made a glow throughout the week for her. First she talked to Roger's mother, when they exchanged news of him, then one of the children, they took it in "turns," would come to the telephone and hurtle through it, at the rate of sixteen to the dozen, to tell Felicia a hundred and one things before the "three pips" went. Being Munroes, they beat the three pips to it every time.

So the days passed until Felicia was surprised to find they could now be counted into weeks since Roger had sailed. Busy, occupied days that saw her every night, before she went to bed, writing to him as she sat alone in her bedroom.

Busy occupied days for her father who, no matter how much he did, gave out such a feeling of jocund confidence that one felt he could shoulder the world on his magnificent shoulders and not find it too heavy. Everything was as it once had been, except that Felicia insisted on being his chauffeur instead of the play-time daughter he had done his best to make her into, because she was so precious to him. But there was something rather nice about having his daughter as his chauffeur. He saw so much more of her for one thing that there was a companionship between them, even when they didn't happen to be speaking to each other, that had not existed to the same extent before.

Yes, everything was just the same as it used to be, he

thought with satisfaction, so much so that he sometimes found himself forgetting about that long lanky husband of hers out somewhere in the Middle East. Felicia was still in her old home, with him. Everything was just the same as it used to be.

That was what he was thinking contentedly as he sat beside her in the front of the car while she drove him home one evening. He disliked sitting in the front of the car, but as Felicia couldn't very well sit in the back and drive him, and he liked to be near enough to speak to her in comfort, he had to change his seat. "Not Mahomet going to the mountain," he would say vigorously as he climbed in beside her, "but the mountain going to the mole-hill!"

He sat beside her in the beautifully smooth running car as she drove him confidently through the black-out to home. A sharp wind was blowing, whipping long strands of rain against the wind-screen. That feeling of contentment that he hadn't had since he was a child, for since then he had taken such things for granted, stole over him now, a sense of well-being, of all that was cosy inside while the wind blew and rain fell outside, in the darkness that crept up to the very window-pane.

Then he heard his daughter at his side saying quietly:

"Daddy, I've something to tell you. I've been to Dr. Greenshields and he says I'm going to have a baby."

He sat immovable, his head sunk on his massive shoulders, the iris of his eyes widening as, through his daughter's words, there chimed another voice, a voice like hers yet deeper, more resonant, a voice that said:

"Miles, darling, I've been to Dr. Phillips and, isn't it wonderful?—I'm going to have a baby."

The baby she had had sat beside him, driving him through the dark, the wind and the wet, but the woman who had spoken—where was she? He shut his eyes as though through the impact of a shock. She had died giving birth to her—their child. Now Felicia was going to have a baby. Such things ran in families. Appalled at where his hunted thoughts were leading him, he lost complete control of himself. The last time he had done that had been when they broke the news to him that his wife was dead.

He opened his eyes, swung round where he sat and gripped her arm.

"Stop," he said hoarsely. "Do you hear me? Stop at once, I say."

She brought the car to a standstill, turning to look at him, fearful from the tone of his voice that he was ill.

"Why, daddy," she said gently, "what's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

His head had sunk even lower, as though he had subsided where he sat. He was staring straight before him.

"I'll get someone else to take us home," he was saying. "You'll give up everything straight away, Felicia, that wretched canteen, everything——"

"Daddy!" she laughed protestingly, starting the car once more. "What a baby you are yourself! Why, darling, Dr. Greenshields says it won't be until June! He says I am to carry on just as usual." There was a softness on her face, like a bloom, as she steered the car through the black-out.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Do you hear me? You'll do nothing of the kind, I tell you. These fools of doctors—did they foresee, or could they hinder what happened before? I'll get a nurse in to-morrow."

"Daddy."

Her breath gave between her parted lips. Of course, that was why he was taking her news like this. He had lost his wife, he thought there was a chance of losing his daughter under the same circumstances. Poor darling daddy. Felicia realised she was up against something that would be neither reasoned away nor joked aside, that could be dealt with as little as it could be controlled.

"Daddy darling," she said gently, "Dr. Greenshields says everything is all right, is going to be all right——" She knew he was thinking, "That's what that fool of a Phillips told *her*." "I've never felt better," she went on, and like a boomerang received his thoughts, "That's what *she* used to say." "I know everything's going to be all right," she said, trying to reassure him by making common ground of what was instinctive with him, "I feel it, daddy. It's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened——" Her thoughts dreamed until she realised, with a little shiver, from the silence of the man at her side that sometime, somewhere, her mother had said those self-same words to him. "Daddy," she said desperately at last, "I'll give up doing everything if it'll make you feel any better, although I know it would

help me to go on as long as I can, doing what I'm doing. But I refuse to have a nurse."

In sickening waves, it came back to him, what he had banked to the very back of his memory. He had filled his mind with the complication and pressure of ever extending business that he would forget what had been his life before, to crowd the thought of her out of it as she had been in the height of her beauty, at the same age that Felicia was now, when they had come to tell him she was dead——

No longer was the darkness on the other side of the window-pane, and he and Felicia safely inside in the glow and warmth and light, out of the wind and wet. As the winter days lightened into spring, and spring brightened into summer, he felt the darkness he had always kept outside, at bay, invade his stricken thoughts. Forbidden feet were crossing the threshold of his sanctuary, and Felicia would see him watching her, his expression heavy with foreboding.

She realised it would not have had so bad an effect on her father if she had been away from home. He would have been ridden with anxiety but not to this extent. It was the fact that she was moving about the house in which her mother had moved that was making him feel events were closing in a cycle around him. But when she suggested having her child in a nursing-home, his broad brow darkened and he asked what was she thinking of—didn't she feel happy in her own home?

Roger's baby—the excitement of writing to tell him, when all the house was hushed, the thrill of hearing from him that he had received her wonderful news. She carried his letter with her everywhere, slept with it below her pillow, woke holding it in her hand. The glory of what was happening to her unfolded her in that golden serenity that some women do experience at such times. Only what she realised her father was going through marred these precious days for her, when every crocus piercing through the brown earth appeared like a miracle. Only that and the fact that he insisted she should have a fully trained nurse attending her throughout the month of May. A week before her child was due to be born, two more nurses made their appearance, crackling in their white aprons.

Everything that he could think of he had done. And yet he felt as though he were spending his time beating his head

against a stone wall. After all, he had done everything that he could think of for his beloved wife, surrounded her in her beautiful home with nurses, doctors, specialists, everything his wealth could conjure forth, and what had happened? The very thing nurse, doctor or specialist had not expected, the death of their patient in childbirth. Now they were all saying to him about Felicia what they had said about her mother. "Everything all right, Sir Miles," "Nothing to worry about, Sir Miles——" Dr. Greenshields' good-natured "Good heavens, Sir Miles, you're more of a patient to me than my own patient!"

Didn't they see what he was seeing with such painful clarity? Were they all so inept they could even joke? No one had expected his wife to die, and she died. No one expected Felicia to die—— All their skill could not save her mother's life. That was the same as saying that all their skill might not be sufficient to save Felicia's——

His brow was damp as he left his offices in Glasgow one evening, later than usual, for it was after six o'clock. He flung himself heavily into the back of his car, which his secretary prepared to head out of the city as usual.

"Yes," he heard his master say finally, as though suddenly making up his mind. "Fenwick, don't drive me home. Drive me first to Number 17 Fir Road."

"Yes, sir."

Sunk in his seat, the baronet's face brooded as he stared straight before him, the lines running from his nose to his mouth uncharacteristically heavily grooved. When the car came to a smooth standstill, he jerked himself out of his thoughts and descended on to the pavement. He pushed open the gate, which opened somewhat reluctantly now and which, he noticed, was quite unlike any other gate in the long road, having been painted in stripes. He strode up the short path and rang the bell, with an emphatic first finger. Before its jangle had died away, the door was opened by a child in a pink frock, obviously the daughter of the house.

"I want to speak to your mother," Sir Miles informed her brusquely.

"I'm so sorry you can't as she's not in," said the girl. Felicia's father didn't think he'd ever heard anything so unreasonable as this child's mother being out when he happened to call. "She shouldn't be long though," his small

hostess remarked helpfully, "she's just gone over the way to Mrs. Gray. Would you like to come in and wait?"

Sir Miles did "like" and entered the hall with such firmness he felt he shook it. The girl showed him into the room he had been in before, a room that had obviously begun its life with every intention of being a drawing-room. Now some odd pieces of a Meccano set were strewn on the blue carpet and a basket of mending sat on the most comfortable chair in the room. His hostess removed it that he could sit there and sat down beside him, twining her bare legs round the leg of her chair, apparently to do the honours of the house until her mother returned.

"My name's Prue," she said obligingly. "What's yours?"

"Sir Miles Saunders," he replied absently, his eyes roving until he saw what he was looking for, the photograph of a private in the place of honour on his mantelpiece. If he had known, he thought, the last time he was here that that man was going to be his son-in-law—— Sharing the place of honour on the mantelpiece was another photograph that hadn't been there before, a photograph of Felicia——

"Then you're Felicia's father!" Prue was exclaiming delightedly. "How do you do?" and she shook hands with him warmly. "It's lovely about the baby, isn't it? Will you excuse me if I go to tell the others you're here?"

She brought back a whole crowd of children to see him. He recognised Tim at once as the small boy he had tried to enslave and failed. He was under the impression they were all Munroes, which everyone thought such a funny joke. Apparently, however, Tim and a small girl with a flushed face called Jill were the only other two members of the family. The others were "just friends in to play."

Then someone heard their mother out in the hall. Everyone rushed to tell her.

"Mummy! Mummy! Come quick, you'll never guess who's here? Guess who, mummy! Felicia's father."

He rose to face her where she stood in the doorway.

"Good-evening, Sir Miles."

"Good-evening, Mrs. Munro."

She said something to the children, who disappeared like quicksilver, laughing and shouting as they scampered through the house to reach the back garden, where he heard their voices, muted by distance, like the voices of the children he had once played with in his once upon a time.

Mrs. Munro shut the door behind her, and came towards the unlit hearth.

"Felicia's all right, isn't she, Sir Miles?" she said, watching him urgently to discover why he of all people should be calling on her.

"They say she is." His words jumbled together in a manner uncharacteristic of his usual decisive speech.

"You're not pleased about the child, are you?" she enquired quietly after a pause. "Because I suppose my son is its father."

"It's nothing to do with that, nothing," he said roughly. She sat down and he seated himself opposite. "It's Felicia." He was glaring at her across the pretty, shabby room. "Her mother died when she was born."

"Ah." Comprehension lit the clear, serene face of the woman opposite. "I remember Roger told me that. And you are anxious lest anything should happen to Felicia because it happened to her mother?"

He saw no reason to answer since she seemed to have reached the heart of the matter with the same unerring instinct that leads an Arab to a well. He watched her reach for the mending basket her daughter had placed on the floor and take out a small jersey which was in such a hole-riddled condition he did not really think it worth the mending. Mrs. Munro evidently did. She threaded a darning needle, then looked at him and held his gaze.

"Felicia is perfectly healthy," she remarked, "everything is quite normal. What have you to fear?"

"Because that's what they said about her. Everything was normal, she was perfectly healthy. Nobody ever dreamt what happened was going to happen. She had Titian hair, and that skin that sometimes goes with it——"

"Yes," said the woman opposite musingly, "I know. Like a camelia petal."

"Yes," he agreed. Of course Mrs. Munro was a writer, an authoress, naturally she would get the right word, know what he was driving at. That was of course why he felt so much of the fever and heat and strain go out of his thoughts as he sat beside her. "Well, it gave her an air of fragility. Felicia's got it too, don't you think? A delicacy——"

"Transparency. Yes, I know what you mean."

"Well, when her mother was having Felicia, she lost that look. She never looked better in her life, stronger, more

robust." Involuntarily his eyes narrowed with the pain of his thoughts. "Neither does Felicia," he said harshly.

The woman opposite viewed him with compassionate eyes.

"Naturally, Sir Miles," she said gently. "Most women do. You see, having children is a woman's normal function. It's what she had been born for, isn't it? She is coming into her heritage—that's all."

"Yes, but supposing what happened to her mother happens to Felicia. No one can say it can't. It happened before for no reason these fools of doctors could foresee. It can happen again, can't it?"

He had never spoken about it to anyone before. He didn't know why he should speak about it now, go into that unaired cupboard where it had lain all these years.

"You don't understand. You must know what happened. I was sitting, and I heard Felicia cry. You know what that is—to hear your child's voice for the first time. No matter how many children are born, it's always a miracle, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Munro, weaving her darning needle through woollen bars. "Someone has said, you know, that every birth is a proof that God isn't yet discouraged with man."

"I waited for them to come and tell me whether it was a girl or boy. I waited and waited. I never dreamt of anything being wrong. I thought, naturally, there would be a lot to do, that they'd come, one of them, when they could. When they did come, the two doctors came together to tell me she was dead."

Mrs. Munro was looking directly at him, holding his glance again.

"Sir Miles," she said, "there are some things that are beyond us, that we cannot fathom. We must do the hardest thing of all, accept them without knowing why such things should be. Your wife——" Strange how it didn't jar upon but eased him to hear her talk of his wife, strange how he felt as though some light had penetrated the dark corners of the cupboard he had kept unaired for so long, light that cleansed, purified, strengthened. "No one can explain why your wife should be taken from you, but I saw something in the newspaper the other day that helped me as I feel it will help you. It was from a quotation in the In Memoriam Notice

to a young airman and his crew. It said 'God must have a beautiful garden, for He always picks the best.' "

Of course—why had he not thought of that before—perhaps because he had been thinking about his own troubles to the exclusion of everything else—but no wonder the woman opposite understood what he had gone through. For she had been through it herself. She had lost her husband. Must have been quite a young man. The bread-winner to go, and the young widow left with a family of children upon her hands, to feed, clothe, educate— A good thing that long, lanky son of hers was grown up now, helping to meet household expenses instead of living upon them.

"Why I came this evening," he said, brusque because he was more accustomed to concede than ask for favours, "was not—to talk about myself, but to ask if you'll come to Newstones to be with Felicia—over it—I mean, you're a mother, had children of your own. You're bound to know more about it than these nurses. And after all," he said with what he considered damaging point, "it's your grandchild as much as it is mine!"

Mrs. Munro laughed.

"Of course I'll come," she said, and he didn't object to her laughter although Dr. Greenshields' jokes grated on his every nerve. "This is Thursday, and it's due a week to-day. Well, what about my coming on Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"That wouldn't do at all," he replied, his face darkening at the very thought. "I mean you to come to-night. I've got the car outside. We can go back together."

Mrs. Munro looked up from her darning.

"But come, come, Sir Miles," she expostulated, "what am I to do about the house?"

"Shut it up," he informed her with the finality of the born autocrat.

"And the children?" she enquired. "Shut them up inside it?"

He snapped his fingers with impatience: he had completely forgotten her most inconvenient brood of children.

"They'll have to come too," he said crossly, "that's all there is to it" Newstones was big enough to house a crèche: he wouldn't need to see any of them except Mrs. Munro once they had arrived.

"No," she said calmly, "that wouldn't do at all. They mustn't miss their schools. Denys is having examinations

just now." As though schools and examinations mattered a plum stone compared to his life and death affairs. "Mrs. Brown of course would take Prue and Jill, I know—after all Sadie and Jasper Brown are more in this house than they are in their own home! Denys is with his cousins in Mount Florida—he was coming back to-night of course, but I could 'phone them just to keep him."

"Yes, that's the thing to do," he agreed hurriedly, with amiability because he saw he was going to get his own way.

"But I'll have to bring Tim with me," she remarked. 'His digestion is upset at present and I can't expect anyone else to trouble about it except me.' He wouldn't have objected if she had suggested bringing the man in the moon with her, as long as she came to-night. "And then there's Jenny——" she was saying reflectively.

"And who," he demanded, "is Jenny?" Surely not another daughter.

"The maid who comes daily," she replied easily. "I'll have to get in touch with her to-night so that she won't come to-morrow morning."

"Well, telephone," he said, determined not to be beaten by Jenny.

"Jenny isn't on the telephone."

"Wire her, then."

"No, that wouldn't do. They've a boy at the front, and Mrs. Beaton might think it was bad news."

Mrs. Munro's life, he thought, considering her watchfully, must be a very complicated affair with these involved ramifications she put up to protect other people's feelings. The point was Mrs. Munro didn't look in the least as though she found life complicated: indeed she appeared the picture of serenity darning the small, very much out-at-elbow jersey. She looked as though she had all day to call her own, when he was in a fret of impatience to be safely on their way to Newstones. If she didn't make a move soon, Denys would be home from his cousins and they'd have him on their hands to dispose of.

"Where does Jenny live?" he asked crossly. "Rutherglen? Then the car can drop you at her house on our way."

He sat alone in the small unfamiliar room while he heard his hostess's gentle voice 'phoning from somewhere or other to a Mrs. Brown and then to someone she called "Sadie."

The door was suddenly bumped open by someone's knee and the next moment Prue came in with a tray, followed by Jill with a teapot and Tim carefully carrying a plate of chocolate biscuits.

"Mummy says I'm to give you tea while she gets ready," Prue informed him delightedly, sitting down before the tray and letting her hands flutter over it, putting spoons on saucers and removing the cream jug from the bowl, exactly as she had seen her mother do. "How do you take your tea?" she asked politely, standing up to perform the business part. "Are you sure you don't take sugar?" she wheedled, her small face falling. "I've got the good lump for you and everything."

He was quite sure, and watched Jill take her seat on the pouffe and Tim seat himself on a footstool where he was handed a biscuit, which he at once pointed out had chocolate on one side only.

"We can't help things like that," Prue told him sternly. "This is war-time and you're very lucky to have chocolate on one side."

Tim, unimpressed, began to lick the chocolate from his biscuit. Jill's flushed little face had been scarlet ever since she entered as though she were at bursting-point keeping something to herself. Her gaze fixed itself on their visitor, as if afraid he might disappear before she had time to say what she wanted. She now remarked:

"Mummy said you'd invited us all to your home. Thank you very much. I'm very sorry we couldn't come."

Prue gave her a warning nudge: Jill was obviously "leading up" and the other Munroes were never sure where Jill's leading up would lead.

"I'm very sorry too," Sir Miles replied with urbanity, guileless of the guileful Jill. "Your mother didn't want you to miss your schooling, of course."

"No. Of course not." He wasn't to know Jill was at her most fatal when she sounded most reasonable. She helped herself to another biscuit and took a bite out of it to sustain her. "There's always week-ends, of course," she said meaningfully over it, to no one in particular, in her silky little voice.

"Jill!" Prue was scandalised and Tim took another biscuit. He hadn't finished demolishing the first but liked to "keep up" with the family.

Sir Miles hastily cleared his throat.

"Of course," he said, "there are always week-ends. You're not at school then, are you?"

"No," Jill told him helpfully. "We're not. Of course," she said obligingly, "we wouldn't expect to be invited this week-end. I mean that's the day after to-morrow and that wouldn't be fair, but the week-end after that the baby will have come and everything——"

"The baby will have come and everything——" How blessedly sweet and simple it all sounded from a child's lips.

"Yes," he said, and forced himself to repeat it, "the baby will have come then. You'll want to see it, won't you? Well, you'll have to come the week-end after next, won't you?"

"That's very good of you," Jill assured him warmly, "we'd love to accept your invitation, wouldn't we, Prue? Mummy, isn't it lovely," she greeted her mother who entered at that moment in her outdoor clothes. "You'll never guess what! Sir Miles has asked us to visit him the week-end after next!"

Prue had Jill's nightgown and her own, both their tooth-brushes and a hair-brush between them, in a nightdress-bag sewn riotously in lazy daisy stitch. They asked Sir Miles if he would "drop" them at the Browns'. He said he would be delighted and then heard from Tim that the Browns lived only two houses away. However, he had made a promise and was prepared to keep it. Going down the garden path, Mrs. Munro asked him if he had noticed whether she had turned the gas off at the main or not? For the first time in his life he felt totally inadequate as he said he was afraid he hadn't. They all trooped back to see, just to put mother's mind at rest, when it was discovered that she had not.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FELICIA lay in her beautiful bed, her eyes shut. She wasn't sleeping, but if one of the three nurses thought she was awake, they would sit beside her to talk to her, feeling, since there was so little to do for her so far, they could at least do that. And Felicia didn't want to talk to any of them, not even to nice Nurse MacNab, the oldest of the three who had been with her longest.

She kept trying to dismiss what she had heard as the idle gossip of two idle women, yet the words would come back again and again, to rankle and fret.

"Did you ever see anything like her things?" Nurse Jones had asked Nurse Lattimer. "I mean, the Queen herself couldn't have a quilt to equal hers."

"I know. Her old man must be rolling."

"And she married a nobody. Just a private in the army, with hardly a squeeze of tooth-paste to call his own——"

That was all. Just the kind of nonsense two women who knew nothing, with too much time on their hands, would talk. But even knowing that, those chance overheard words had the power to disturb Felicia because, although she was unaware of it, everything had begun to prey on her, string her up into a highly nervous condition.

She was in bed now all day. Dr. Greenshields thought it best to take every precaution considering the history of her mother and more to appease Sir Miles than anything else. But Felicia, as she lay with her arm over her eyes, wasn't to know that. She was beginning to wonder if something wasn't perhaps wrong, or going to go wrong, as her father so dreaded. If she didn't die, she might lose her child, Roger's child. They were all trying to keep things from her, that's what she was beginning to feel, while they did their best to be falsely bright in her presence. Otherwise why would she be kept in bed for so long? Mrs. Spence, who lived next door to the Munroes, had been up and about the day before her child had been born. Felicia could remember Mrs. Munro telling her all about it. Oh, how long ago it seemed since last year when she had sat in the dining-room with Mrs. Munro, who hadn't been her mother-in-law then, while she helped

to cover and label pots of jam as they talked in the intimate way of two women who find themselves alone together.

All the beautiful serenity that had enfolded her since she had known she was going to have a child seemed to have deserted her, receded to leave her hopelessly by herself, scared, disturbed, apprehensive. As though, instead of borne on gentle waves, safe in the knowledge of the strength and power of the whole ocean behind her, she found herself lying, high and dry, on a deserted shore.

Roger was so far away. She had felt so near to him but now the communication-cord between them was stretched to heartbreakingly snapping point. What would Roger feel when he heard that his baby, the child she was bearing him, was perhaps born dead? Her eyes widened with terror. And she couldn't be near him, to comfort and help him. He would be alone as she was alone, at the other end of the communication-cord, the whole world rolled between them.

All her life she had had strangers round her, nurses, servants, governesses and tutors. Now, at what was a crisis, she still had strangers, nice Nurse MacNab, the too sparkling Nurse Jones, the over careful Nurse Lattimer. No one "belonging" to her except her father who naturally was unable to be nearer to her than a devoted father could be. No one "belonging" to her, except her father until she married Roger—and now he was on the other side of the world where the whole family she had inherited with her marriage might well be for all she saw of them.

She heard voices in the corridor outside, then her door opened. She raised her arm wearily to see who it would be, which of the three nurses, hoping it would be Nurse MacNab.

It was none of them. Her lips parted in a wild cry of delight that came straight from her heart and broke on tears. The next moment she was in Roger's mother's arms.

"This is my housekeeper, Mrs. Munro, Mrs. Stimson," introduced Sir Miles.

"How do you do." They bowed to one another across the room. He noticed Mrs. Munro was as much at her ease here as she had been in her own shabby home. "Did I see two nurses upstairs?" she asked.

"There are three to see," Mrs. Stimson felt bold enough to answer.

"Three!" Mrs. Munro was scandalised. "You'll have to get rid of two of them to-morrow, Sir Miles," she informed him with smiling firmness. "We mustn't prepare for the worst, you know, that's not fair to Felicia, we must prepare for the best. Besides, no matter what happened, what help would three nurses be, each depending on the other and getting in each other's way——"

"Bad enough in the house before anything happens," remarked Mrs. Stimson, "more work themselves than a whole hospital of patients——"

Sir Miles saw a look of complete understanding pass between the two women, a look from which he was excluded, being merely male.

"Four nurses now you've got me is rather a tall order, you know!" Mrs. Munro told him, "I could really manage beautifully by myself," she said serenely, "but we'll keep the elderly one, Sir Miles, as a concession to you!"

"What everyone seems to have forgotten," he pointed out, "is that when the baby does come—it'll need a nurse."

"Yes, it will have three," Mrs. Munro said absently, going over to the window.

"Three?"

"Yes, me, the nurse and Felicia. She'll want her own baby. That's enough even for Sir Miles' grandchild!" she laughingly chided him. "You know, Sir Miles," she said gravely to him, "a famous doctor once said that the slightly neglected child is healthier than the child who is over-looked after. We'll have to remember that, won't we, both in Felicia's case and the baby's." She stood looking out into the grounds where birches stood like wands of silver, drenched in the light of sunset. "How beautiful it is here," she remarked, "for them both. Felicia and the baby, I mean. She and I will be able to have a lovely walk to-morrow without even leaving the grounds!"

Apprehensively he jerked his head to look at her.

"Dr. Greenshields says she is to stay in bed."

Her finely marked eyebrows lifted humorously.

"Does he? I can't understand that—there's nothing wrong with Felicia." She looked directly at him. "I think she's being kept in bed, if you ask me, to quieten you, Sir Miles! Anyway, we'll see Dr. Greenshields to-morrow, shan't we? There is no reason why she shouldn't have a walk. No reason at all I'm sure, Sir Miles, why Felicia shouldn't

be up and about to the very last minute. It's much better for her being amongst us than turning a perfectly normal girl into an invalid, making the natural into the abnormal. Then we shouldn't be surprised if things do go wrong, for we've really manufactured the trouble ourselves, haven't we?"

"Have it your own way," he said good-humouredly, seating himself at the table after she had sat down. He had no confidence in these fools of doctors or nurses, however they crackled with starched efficiency, that was why his one instinct had been to multiply them, but the odd thing was he had confidence in the woman opposite him. Must be because she was a mother herself, he came to the conclusion. He remembered thinking in their first interview he had got her in a cleft stick. In their second he had felt the one caught in that cleft stick. Now he realised the cleft stick had turned into the victory sign. She had done that, not him.

It was a pleasure having a meal with her company instead of with his own, his unhappy thoughts making the silence monstrous. He was always at his best when he was host, taking trouble to be at his most genial and benignant. Now that he felt the weight of misery, like a hump he had carried wherever he moved, had been dispelled, he was at his most charming and entertaining, thinking how charming and entertaining his guest was, not realising that he was top of the notch himself.

When he came down for breakfast next morning, the sunshine was flooding through the front rooms, casting mosaics of colour on the beautiful floors where it filtered through stained glass panes. It seemed difficult to think of anything going wrong on a beautiful day such as this. Breezily he entered the breakfast-room to find Tim waiting for someone to join him. He had not thought somehow of Tim having meals with them. He should be being fed in a nursery by himself, shouldn't he? he demanded of himself, not feeling he knew Tim well enough to put the question direct to him. They eyed each other with some respect and a great deal of reserve until Tim's mother entered. She apparently had never thought of her offspring having his meals separately. He never had at home, she said, and what was the good of causing trouble here? No trouble, Sir Miles would have liked to point out to her but didn't. It would spoil his meal if half of it was spent watching a child, who should be in a

nursery, being fed mouthful by mouthful. But Tim, to his surprise, managed his knife and fork by himself with some proficiency and drank his milk out of a cup he held in both hands.

The whole tone of the house had changed. Sir Miles noticed it whenever he returned home that night. An excitement and happiness pervaded it, seemed to come to the door to welcome him and draw him into it. Miss Felicia had been up, Mrs. Stimson told him, and out—as far as the little pond. She had gone to bed early. Sir Miles, when he went upstairs to see her, found Tim sitting on her bed, “to keep her company,” swinging his tacketty boy’s boots while he whittled a piece of wood with a fiendish looking knife young Sam, the under gardener, had given him.

This week-end was so different from last week-end. He thought that as he felt Felicia’s arm through his while they walked through the silver birch copse, Tim, who was accompanying them, shunting like an engine. What would next week-end bring? In spite of himself, he felt his brow suddenly clam and some of the warmth seemed to leave the sun. If he could but jump the intervening week, arrive at next Sunday without living through the days that stretched so precariously between—

But such thoughts were only recurrent now and again, he was not living with them permanently as he had been before. He was not haunted now by Felicia’s happiness, dreading for her what it might unfold into. Instead he felt infected, cheered by it, wanting to assure her instead of looking for assurance himself with an almost superstitious urgency.

He waited in the little morning-room upstairs to hear the news as soon as possible. “You’ll want to know whether it’s a boy or girl!” Mrs. Munro had told him. A boy or a girl! As though it mattered which it was, as though anything mattered as long as Felicia was safe. He didn’t want to wait in his study, that was where he had waited before. He didn’t want to set any vicious circle revolving again.

Now it had come to the bit, it was only natural that his thoughts should revert to that earlier day, the day Felicia was born, twenty-two years ago. He had been waiting then as he was waiting now, waiting for them to come and tell him a son or daughter, an heir or little heiress, had been born. Instead they had come to tell him his wife was dead.

He was re-living the agony of these moments over again, as he had not done since he had lived them in actuality. They were forced upon him, what he had forced himself not to think upon, tried to smother, suffocate, build out of his life because he could not bear to think upon it.

Then he heard a baby's cry waver forlornly through the silent house.

Thus he had heard Felicia's entry into the world as he walked up and down the corridors, waiting for them to come to tell him whether he had a son or a daughter. The baby then was safe, as his baby had been, but what about Felicia? Was history going to repeat itself with diabolical detail?

Although it seemed to him like eternities, he knew it was not so very long when he heard footsteps coming down the corridor, hurrying footsteps. He did not turn his head, but stood quite still, his massive back to the door.

"Felicia's all right, Sir Miles," he heard Mrs. Munro's voice say. "Everything has gone beautifully. The specialist says she's just the kind who should have children! Now do you want to come and see your small grandson?"

He turned to face her, almost painfully as though he had a stiff neck. He looked at her face across the room, radiant as he knew Felicia's would be, radiant as he had not been permitted ever to see his wife's, radiant as only a woman's can be before the miracle of birth. And in that radiance, the shadow he had pulled behind him, darkening his path, was dissolved for good.

He felt he had to go to see his grandson, more for Mrs. Munro's sake, who seemed so anxious to show him it. But his relief was so great about Felicia that he felt a grandchild was quite small fry compared to it.

So it was a son, was it? His handsome face eased as he followed Mrs. Munro down the corridor to the room next Felicia's.

His grandson looked unutterably bored as it lay amongst its shawls and yawned brazenly in his grandfather's face.

"It's very small," he remarked for something to say, as he poked at it with a finger to which the baby suddenly clung with some tenacity.

"Small!" Mrs. Munro was most indignant. "Sir Miles, what did you expect? It's nine pounds, that's one pound over average. Why, he's a beautiful big baby."

"Yes, he's a fine wee fellow," Sir Miles remarked hurriedly. "What a grip the man's got! He won't always be red like that, will he?"

"No, of course not. And he's not so very red. Pink I'd call him, a little flushed perhaps. They always are," Mrs. Munro said lovingly. She was apparently in a besotted condition already over her first grandchild, as to anyone else the baby's face was next door to scarlet.

He certainly was no skinny long lanky baby, but prosperous and plump looking, with "bracelets" and "necklaces" and "anklets" where such things should be.

"He's got the Saunders build," said Sir Miles, his voice fat with satisfaction. "If he goes on at this rate, he'll outweigh me before he's ten!"

"He won't," Mrs. Munro told him contemptively from the store of her baby lore. "Roger was nine pounds too when he was born."

Sir Miles suddenly cleared his throat.

"H'mm," he said, his eyes beginning to glare, "you'll want your son to know he's a father as soon as possible, won't you? And what he's a father of!" He looked down at his grandson lying on his back. "I'll see to that straight away," he said.

"If you would," she said gratefully. "Now, remember, Sir Miles, he's a beautiful big baby. You're not to say anything on the cable about him being small and red!"

"As though I'd let my side down," he joked back.

It really seemed a shame to unloosen that small finger wound so compactly round his large one, but he promised the baby with eye movement that he would be back again soon to see him. It looked very knowing as it closed one eye at him.

He saw them coming up the avenue, keeping close together in a bunch.

As Mrs. Munro was with Felicia, Sir Miles felt it incumbent upon him to go to the front door to greet his guests. Besides no one else seemed about. The boy gravely shook hands with him.

"How do you do?" he said. "We haven't met before, have we? I'm Denys. We didn't say what train we'd come by, because we didn't want you to feel you had to send to meet us."

Sir Miles, feeling he was being organised within an inch of his life, shook hands all round.

"Are they sending your luggage from the station?" he asked.

"Oh no, we've got it here," and Jill triumphantly waved a cheap hat-box at him. "We always travel in a hat-box for the week-end," she informed him. "It's the handiest thing out. You've no idea how much a hat-box can hold."

Looking at the bumpy contours of the one she carried, Sir Miles thought he had a fairly shrewd idea.

"Well, come in, come in," he greeted them. "We'll have tea together, won't we? And you'll want to see the baby——"

"This very moment," breathed Prue.

"Before we take off our hats or gloves or anything," said Jill, drawing attention to her gloves which were worn, on pressure from Prue, only for Sir Miles' benefit.

Tim now made his appearance, very nonchalant and monosyllabic, feeling the others were "just visiting" but he was "stopping" here. They trotted beside Sir Miles up the stairs and along the corridor, getting closer and closer to him as the more awed they became at the vastness and magnificence of everything.

"The nurse's out," remarked Sir Miles, "and the baby should be sleeping. If she were in, I wouldn't dare bring you like this. So don't you go and waken the baby."

They promised faithfully.

"Is the nurse nice?" Prue asked him in a confiding, exchanging-notes kind of way.

"Yes, but firm." He stopped at a door to look down at them. "Sometimes I wonder if it's our baby or hers, if you know what I mean."

They knew exactly.

"Just like the Spences next door," Prue whispered up to him. "Mr. Spence said, after their nurse went, he had to be introduced to his own baby as that was the first time he had seen her properly!"

They stole into the airy room beside him, squeaking on their tiptoes, and stood round the frilly basinette. He watched their bright little faces glow at what they saw in the subdued light of the curtained room.

"Did you ever," breathed Prue, above clasped hands.

"I never did," gasped Jill.

Denys was smiling in a shy kind of way, trying hard not to look impressed.

"Look at his finger nails," whispered Prue, nudging her sister.

"I know," said Jill, nudging her back. "I can see him breathing and everything. Oh," she gave an excited little squeal and clapped her hand over her mouth too late," he's opening his eyes! I swear he is! Did you ever see anything like that?"

Nobody had as, with held breaths, they watched the baby open his eyes and stare contemplatively at the side of his bassinet.

"Blue eyes," said Prue, giving a sigh of sheer contentment that reached from her sandalled toes. "All babies have blue eyes when they're born," she informed Sir Miles, "but his will stay blue because of Felicia. She's the bluest eyes of anyone I ever saw."

The baby kicked below his bed-clothes and decided to make it known that he had awakened. He let out a cry. Sir Miles at once stooped to pick him up.

"Do you think you should?" Jill asked fearfully.

"Yes, of course," Denys said indignantly. "Only nurses think babies should be left to cry."

"I am his grandfather," Sir Miles remarked mildly, "and grandfathers know much better than nurses what's good for babies!"

"And we're his uncles and aunts!" they chirruped and crowed to him while the baby surveyed them over his grandfather's broad shoulder.

"What amuses me," said Jill, laughing behind her hand, "is to think of Tim being Uncle."

"I see nothing funny about it," Tim told her with dignity.

"Neither do I," Sir Miles backed him up. He genuinely didn't. Tim, he felt, was the oldest person in any company. In fact if he himself had turned out to be the uncle and Tim the grandfather, Sir Miles wouldn't have been in the least surprised.

At that moment Mrs. Munro, who had heard the baby cry, came in from next door where she had been with Felicia. There was a stampede to tell her how beautiful they thought their nephew and they called out to Felicia, whom they weren't to see until after tea, "in penny numbers," Mrs. Munro said firmly.

"Isn't he lovely, Felicia?"

"He's got your eyes, Felicia!"

"Have you seen his finger nails, Felicia!"

"Oh, what will Roger say when he sees him!"

Sir Miles heard Felicia, her voice chiming with happiness, calling back to them. In unspoken league with Mrs. Munro he now said it was high time someone thought about tea, and they trooped downstairs with him to the sun-parlour. Here they were introduced to Mrs. Stimson whom, Denys informed her, he had heard all about.

"And I've heard all about you," she told him, "from Miss Felicia, you know." Sir Miles could see the attraction was on both sides.

Mrs. Stimson didn't wait for tea and their host, remembering a small girl pressing him to have the "good lump" sugar, asked Prue to pour out for him. She went scarlet with pleasure, and he took one cup more than usual because of the obvious delight she had pouring it out from the beautiful silver teapot.

"What a lovely tea you've got for us," sighed Jill, blissfully happy.

"It's a tea and a half," Denys complimented him.

He didn't see anything special about it, having been accustomed all his life to teas and a half, but he looked guiltily at the chocolate biscuits and was relieved to see they were coated on both sides.

"If only Roger was here," said Prue, "wouldn't everything be perfect? Let's all shut our eyes and think hard about Roger, and perhaps he'll know where he is."

They sat with eyes squeezed shut and mouths tightly compressed for a solid minute. As all their eyes were shut, none of them saw whether or not Sir Miles had followed suit.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IF ONE LETTER made a "mail," then Roger took it and went outside to read his mail in peace. "In peace" turned out to be where the cook had thrown empty tins in a desultory fashion. There he sat, his heels digging into the sand, unconsciously swatting flies as he tried to overcome his disappointment that this time there wasn't a letter from Felicia, or his mother, or his family. In short, therefore, from no one who counted. Just one letter from someone whose handwriting he didn't even know.

A sickening wave of nostalgia swept over him, for Felicia, for home, for his baby. Good heavens, by the time this racket was all over, and he was able to return, his child would be walking. He would miss all the baby part of him. No hanging over the cot with Felicia spellbound with the wonder that this was their child, something belonging to them as nothing else could belong. No rattling back at night in double quick time to see Felicia bathing him. No kissing them both good-bye in the morning before he set out, calling his son "Funny face!" to hide what he felt seeing him in her arms.

The empty tins, scabbed with the heat of the sun, winked and flashed wickedly in the burning light that relentlessly smote the desert. He kicked one with the toe of his shoe listlessly. He didn't want to go back amongst the others. He had no news to tell them, and they would be full of theirs.

He stooped to pick up his one letter that had fallen, uncared for, from his knee. Frowning unhappily, he slit it open. Half-a-dozen snapshots fluttered out. Before looking at them, he unfolded the letter to read wonderingly:

"Dear Roger,

I thought you might like to have these first pictures of your son and heir. As you will see, we are all in them, except Denys, who took them, but his shadow has come out excellently in most. It was everyone's united ambition for you to have one with the baby laughing, when he is at his most

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